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A NOVEL.

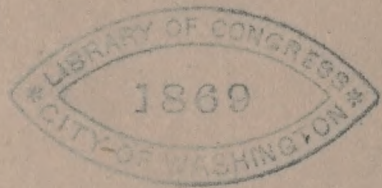
A.

BY

M. D. (NAUMAN) Robinson

"All things come round to him who will but wait."

LONGFELLOW.



PHILADELPHIA:
CLAXTON, REMSEN & HAFFELFINGER,
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TO
The Memory
OF
MY FATHER.

PREFACE.

GOOD wine," says the proverb, "needs no bush." I wish I could think the following pages needed no apology; for such this should be called, instead of a Preface. In sending my little book to try its fortune in the world, I would like to explain how it came to be written.

Begun, nearly three years ago, as a short magazine-story, it has, line by line, page by page, grown, to my own surprise, into its present dimensions. No one can be more sensible than myself of its many imperfections. It makes no pretension to fine writing, to stirring incident—it is but a picture of life as it has come under my own observation.

Its composition has filled the few busy moments of an idle life. And if it only affords the reader, in its perusal, one-half the pleasure its writing has given me, I shall be more than content.

M. D. N.

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SIDNEY ELLIOTT.

CHAPTER I.

MY OWN STORY.

A DARK, dreary evening, the wind wailing mournfully around the house, rustling amid the bare branches of the trees which overhung the old homestead—snow falling heavily from a clouded sky; such was the night after my father's funeral.

We sat by the fire, my mother and I, thinking of the past and planning for the future. Dreary indeed it seemed to us; our past had been so cloudless, so peaceful, that we shrank from the life-struggle which lay before us.

My father was a physician of no small repute. He had amassed, in the practice of his profession, an ample fortune. We lived in comparative luxury. My father, though disclaiming ostentation, believed in solid comfort; and our home was one which any might have envied. I was the only child; and my life, till now, had been one of unalloyed happiness. It was not to last. My father had just determined to relinquish his practice, when the failure of the bank in which his savings were invested

compelled him to abandon his intentions; and, not six months later, he was brought home, dead!

His horse had taken fright at some object on the road, as he was on his way to visit a patient. He was thrown on a pile of stones, and instantly killed. John Elliott, the good physician, the kind father, the tender husband, was no more. Our grief, the grief of those who knew and loved him, can be better imagined than described.

But we had no time to indulge in the "luxury of woe." The poor—for among that number we now found ourselves—may not sit, weeping, with folded hands.

As yet, we had not felt the loss of means. My father's practice, even after the loss of his fortune, had brought him more than sufficient for our wants, and he had begun again to accumulate.

I sat, silently thinking, till my mother's voice aroused me from my reverie.

"Sidney, dear, what are we to do?"

"Do! mother? What *can* we do?"

My poor mother! dependent, as she had always been, upon my father, her gentle, shrinking nature resting on his, strong and firm, she turned, now that her stay and prop was removed, to me.

But I was in no mood to discuss our future prospects. My father's death was a crushing blow to me, and I shrank from anything which diverted my thoughts from him, who, for the first time, slept under the sod. I shuddered at every wail of the wind; and as the snow fell, covering the earth with its pall, I thought how it also lay on his grave, and, chilled at the thought, I cowered closer by the fire.

Alas! I was selfish in the indulgence of my sorrow.

Giving myself up to it, I wholly forgot the meek mourner who sat near me.

Her gentle voice recalled me to myself.

“My poor child! this has been a hard day for you!”

No thought of self, in the wish to console me! O mother-love! pure, holy feeling, thou art, sure, a gift from God! The soft, caressing tone, the quiet thoughtfulness, roused my better self, and I drew closer to the speaker.

“Sidney, ’tis hard—but—”

I broke forth passionately: “Hard—mother—hard, you say? So hard, that I cannot say, ‘Thy will be done!’”

The calm voice never faltered.

“Sidney, my child, your father was very dear to me, yet I can say, ‘Thy will be done!’”

I looked up in amaze. I knew how those two lives had been blended; their perfect oneness—their deep affection the one for the other; yet my mother, frail, feeble, compared to me, for I had inherited my father’s nature and disposition, was the stronger of the two.

She saw the surprise in my eyes. Stooping, she kissed my brow.

“Sidney, I look above! that gives me strength. Seek you there for it, too. And now, my child, to bed, and a night’s rest will better fit us for to-morrow’s duties.”

A long, loving embrace, and we parted for the night.

I shall never forget how the next morning came upon me. I had gone to my bed, thinking sleep could not close my eyes, yet I wept myself to slumber. Completely exhausted, I slept till late. And when the bright rays of the morning sun at last aroused me, oh! only those who have passed through the same ordeal know how I felt. I

woke with the feeling that something—I could not for a moment recall what—had happened. For an instant, that blessed oblivion lasted: then all returned to me.

Why, I thought, did the sun shine so brightly this morning? At least, its rays should not lighten my room, mocking my dark feelings. Better for me the wail of the wind, the clouded sky; and I sprang from my bed to draw the blind.

It was a most lovely morning. The sun shone from a sky of deepest blue, unflecked by a single cloud. The earth was covered with snow, brilliantly white, and every tree was outlined in feathery crystals. I heard the merry sleigh-bells, the laughing voices of the riders; and, throwing myself once more upon my bed, I burst into bitter tears.

They were too violent to last. And when they had spent themselves, and I, startled by a light touch on my shoulder, looked up, my mother stood beside me.

“Are you not coming to breakfast, Sidney?” she asked, smoothing my hair caressingly. “It is very late,” she continued, as the town-clock at that moment struck nine; “and I have been waiting for you, not liking to sit down alone.”

I promised to join her soon, and she left me. She had spoken calmly, but I saw plainly enough that, unlike myself, she had passed a sleepless night.

Our meal was sent away almost untasted. I could scarcely control myself, but a glance at my mother’s sweet, sad face, whenever my feelings nearly overcame me, gave me strength, and I resolved that, to avoid increasing her grief, I would control my own.

“And the evening and the morning were the first day.”

CHAPTER II.

MR. MERTON'S VISIT.

I DO not think that the "straitest Pharisee of them all" can possibly object to the quotation closing my first chapter. The Bible words, forcible as they are, and universally applicable as all find them, seemed particularly suitable here. I remember thinking of them then; and I now, after the lapse of years, see no reason to change my opinion. It was, indeed, the beginning of a new life for me—"the first day" I had realized the change that had come over my worldly prospects.

The day, bright though it was out of doors, to us passed drearily enough. And when night came, I sat, as the evening before, over the fire, silently realizing that my father was indeed gone.

So long as the form, lifeless though it be, of our loved ones is near us, we cannot realize that they are dead. We know 'tis but the clay, soulless, motionless, which, the eyes closed, the hands folded over the pulseless heart, lies shrouded for the tomb; yet we linger near it—thinking, perhaps, 'tis but slumber from which they will soon awaken. Vain hope! the eyes are closed for ever. "It" is but the shadow of the departed, yet, oh! how precious to us the sacred remains. Hallowed by the touch of death—we gaze silently upon them, checking our too violent emotions in their presence. For while yet the cold form rests beneath our roof, we feel our beloved are still with us—something of them still lingers near us. It is not till the sods are heaped over the grave, not till the earth has

hidden from us all that is left of our lost ones, that we realize they are indeed gone; that "the place which knew them shall know them no more."

Thoughts like these passed hurriedly through my mind as I sat on a low stool at my mother's feet. Neither of us wept. We were both calm; but I knew well that her thoughts were but the echo of my own.

I was roused from my reverie by the ringing of the door-bell. A few minutes later, the servant entered, and handed my mother a card, bearing the name of "John Merton" and a pencilled request for admission.

My mother sighed. "I suppose we must see him." A moment later, and he entered the parlor.

Mr. Merton was an old and tried friend of my father. He was a man of perhaps fifty years of age, hale and hearty, enjoying life to the utmost, respected and esteemed by all who knew him.

My mother rose to greet him. "This is indeed kind, Mr. Merton."

"I knew you would not consider me an intruder, Mrs. Elliott," he said cheerily, as they shook hands. "And how is my friend Sidney?" as I advanced to him. His eyes were moist as well as my own as I laid my hand in his.

"You have come to a lonely fireside to-night, Mr. Merton," I said; "yet the more welcome that you leave your own cheerful home to visit ours."

My mother smiled sadly. "We are trying to make our friend as sad as ourselves."

Mr. Merton looked down. "You know, without words, that I feel for you," he said. And from that he went on to speak of my father, of the regret expressed at his death, of the universal esteem in which he was held; and from that he went back to the days

when they had been boys and schoolmates together, until in these reminiscences the evening quickly slipped away.

"I had no idea it was so late," he said at last, looking at his watch. "Here it is ten o'clock, and my business not yet done. Mrs. Elliott," to my mother, "by virtue of the long friendship which, as you know, existed between your husband and myself, will you permit me to attend to all the necessary business for you? You might, to be sure, find some one more competent, but no one more willing to settle your affairs."

"I do not like to trouble you," she began.

"Hush, my dear madam, hush! Trouble! Do you think John Elliott would have called it trouble to have looked over a few papers for an old friend's widow? Not he. And you will let me do for you what your husband would, under similar circumstances, have done for my Mary."

She still hesitated. "Would it not take too much time from your own business?"

"Not a word more, Mrs. Elliott. I am then to consider myself your lawyer, and you may send everybody to me who comes to worry you."

"Then, Mr. Merton, I can only say this: that there is no one in whom I can have more confidence than in yourself. I know that you will do the best you can for us."

"I will deal with you as I would with my own wife and children," he said. "I fear there is but little left for you, from my knowledge of my friend's affairs; but—"

"Let us know the worst at once," my mother said, calmly. "It will be a change, I know; but Sidney and I would rather know at once what we are to expect."

"I will not keep you in suspense. You shall see me again in a few days."

So the conversation ended.

CHAPTER III.

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE.

I HAD scarcely recognized my mother for the past few days. She was one of those gentle, clinging characters who seem to need some stronger mind to rest upon; but of late she had roused herself to think and speak for us both. It increased greatly my admiration for her.

I had always loved my mother; but I fairly idolized my father. My disposition was like his, as were my traits, which may have been partly the reason. But how common a thing it is that the daughters best love the father, while the sons' warmest affection is lavished on the mother! *She* is proud of her sons; *he* most loves his daughters. *She* sees in the boys their father's youth renewed; in the girls *he* finds again the charm by which their mother won him.

In the next few days, however, I found that, as I began to regain my usual tranquillity, my mother more and more leant upon me. Her stay being removed, I was now to take its place. It was only her love for me, her wish to spare me at first, that had urged her to exertions so much at variance with her character; and, in my full appreciation of this, I vowed silently that I would henceforth, so far as lay in my power, render her future path smooth.

Mr. Merton came at last. We had both feared to see him; for on his words depended our future. He did not keep us long in suspense.

"I have only a few minutes to spare this morning,"

he said; "but I thought you would like to know the state of your affairs."

And, in words as gentle as the truth would allow, he told us.

There was very little left for us—a thousand dollars in the bank, the house we lived in, and a small cottage in the suburbs, the rent of which was perhaps sixty dollars a year. That was all.

"Fortunately, Mrs. Elliott, there are no debts—not a penny owing to anybody in the world."

"And we are alone in the world!"

I could not help the remark.

"Have you no relatives?"

"None at all," my mother replied. "My husband was an only child, and I was an orphan."

"I scarcely know what to advise you to do," he resumed, after a pause. "There is John's library, to be sure."

My father's medical library, to which he alluded, was a large and valuable one, collected at great expense.

"I will not part with that," my mother said, coolly.

"I beg your pardon," Mr. Merton replied. "Of course I only spoke in a business point of view; and, perhaps, you had best keep it. Sidney may follow her mother's example."

"I don't intend to marry," I said.

"Nonsense, my dear. I hope you will marry, and that right soon. You'll find it infinitely more agreeable to have somebody to work for you than to have to work for yourself."

There was a pause. He turned to my mother. "Let me know your plans, and I will further them to the best of my ability." And before we could thank him he was gone.

“So we are dependent on our own exertions,” I said, at last. “It is a pleasant prospect for us.”

“It might have been worse, Sidney.”

“I don’t care for myself, mother,” I said; “but it will be so hard for you.”

“My dear, I know all about it.”

For in her youth she had passed through that living slavery—the business of a governess—overworked and underpaid, till my father, meeting her in the sick-room of one of her pupils, fell in love with, and married her.

“There is one thing certain,” I said, at last; “that is, we have not enough to live upon, and we must do something for our support.”

“Whatever we do,” my mother said, thoughtfully, “I don’t want to sell this house. We will keep it, if we can.”

“Sell our home!” I replied, hastily. “Mother, I would work my fingers to the bone sooner than see it pass into the hands of strangers.”

“It would be very painful to me,” she answered. “Here I came a bride, here my children were born, and here my married life was spent.”

“And my whole life,” I added. “Mother, have we no one to look to now?”

“No one in the world,” she replied. “Your father was an only child, and my only brother ran away to sea when only fifteen, and has never been heard of since.”

“If he would only come home with a fortune, as uncles always do in books, it would end all our difficulties. But as it is —”

“We must find ways to live.”

So we came back to our starting point. What we were to do, and what we could do, were to be considered. I

would not listen to my mother's plan of taking boarders. "You are not fit for it, mother dear; and we would have no privacy in our home."

Neither would she agree to my wish to become a daily governess. "Not with my consent, Sidney. I know too well what that life is, to expose my only child to it."

"We would starve at sewing. Stay!" as my eye fell on my piano, silent of late; "the mystery is solved; I will give music lessons."

It was my one talent. My taste for music had early displayed itself, and I had cultivated it with the advantages of the best instruction. Even as a child, I could have no dearer reward than to be allowed to sit and listen to my mother's playing. She was but a passable performer. But so soon as my hands were strong enough to touch the piano, almost before I could read, I had insisted upon learning; and from that time every moment I could, I spent at the piano. Love of the art, ambition, and the assistance of good teachers, are strong incentives, and the consequence was, that by the time I was eighteen, I was a very fair performer, and my teachers gave me every encouragement to proceed, telling me that, with practice, I would, in time, equal the best amateurs in the country.)

"You will find it a hard life, Sidney."

"It is the only opening I see before me, mother."

And the more I thought of it, the more determined I became to carry out my intentions. My duty it seemed to be, and though I shrank from the drudgery—from the torture to which I knew my musical ear would be exposed—I felt I could earn my living by it.

"So, mother," I said, after a long discussion on the subject, "we need say no more. My path is plain be-

fore me, and you will see what a nice little income we shall soon have."

"Provided you find the pupils, Sidney."

"Pupils, mother! I expect to be overrun with them! I'll get a recommendation from my old teacher, Mr. Powers; and then, armed with that, I'll go round among our friends. Sidney Elliott against the world, and you'll see if I don't succeed."

"I hope you may, my child."

"Of course I will, mother. I have youth, health, and strength, three powerful adjuncts; and, as you know, I pretend to no beauty. No careful mother need object to employing me, lest her sons might, by some mishap, fall in love with their sister's music-teacher."

I glanced at the mirror over the mantel as I spoke. My words were true enough; I had no claim to beauty. I saw a figure reflected there, about the middle height, slight, yet healthful, a low brow, crowned with heavy braids of black hair, a pale complexion, and irregular features, only redeemed from positive homeliness by a pair of large black eyes and a good set of teeth. My heavy black draperies were singularly unbecoming, for I needed bright colors, and till now had always worn them; and I turned, with a half sigh, from the reflection before me.

But my mother, I thankfully perceived, had not seen my look, nor heard the sigh. She sat, wearily leaning in her chair, gazing into the fire. But I noticed, for the first time, how frail and delicate she looked.

With the resolution that in the future she should know no care I could keep from her, I pressed a kiss on her brow, and, drawing a chair to the table, sat down to my desk to write my letter to Mr. Powers.

CHAPTER IV.

A BEGINNING.

I HAD not long to wait for Mr. Powers' answer. It came almost immediately. After expressing astonishment at my plans, and giving me the recommendation I desired, he went on to say:

"I am sorry indeed to hear that circumstances have rendered this necessary; but I have no doubt of your success. Were you here, I could procure you, through my own business connection, as many pupils as you could desire; and it probably would be the very best thing you could do to remove to our city. I judge, however, from your letter, that you wish to remain where you are; and if so, I give you full permission to make use of my name in any way you may consider most advantageous to yourself. And if at any time you desire to change your location, come here, and I will do what I can for you."

"Good for you, Mr. Powers!" was my *rather* unlady-like exclamation, as I replaced the letter in its envelope. And so soon as breakfast was over—the postman always came before that meal—I equipped myself in bonnet and cloak, and departed, as I told my mother, to seek my fortunes.

Cheerfully though I had spoken, I was sad enough at heart. If it be only "the first step which is hard," our "first step" was already taken. All our servants, with one solitary exception, had been dismissed. The one we retained, though strong and willing, was young and inexperienced; but the difference between the wages paid her

and those demanded by an older and better domestic, was a serious consideration to us in the reduced condition of our finances.

Still this, though a decided acknowledgment of our poverty—how I hated the word!—did not concern the public, as did my present resolution. My pride, and I had my fair share of that quality, was up in arms against letting the world know we were no longer independent of it. I had never before cared for public opinion, never made any special effort to please or to conciliate. My home and my parents had been all-sufficient to me; their praise, their approbation, all I cared for; and knowing, as I did, that my name was rarely mentioned without the addition of the epithet “proud,” and that many—such is the unkindness of the human heart—would rejoice in what they would call my humiliation, for so I myself felt it, it is not surprising that I started on my expedition, necessary though I knew it to be, most reluctantly.

It was the first time I had been out. I had not even been to church; for I had shrunk from meeting the many glances which I knew would be cast upon me. A morbid feeling had kept me from meeting any of the friends who had visited us, save Mr. Merton, and it was to his house I was now bound.

Before I had walked two squares, the bracing, cold air, for it was a calm winter day, late in December, had its usual exhilarating effect on me. I trod with a lighter step over the crisp snow, and held myself more erect as I drank in the pure air, stimulating and strengthening me, sending the blood tingling through every vein; so that when I reached Mr. Merton’s door, after my half-hour’s brisk walk, I felt like a different being from the dispirited, cheerless girl who had left her own home not many moments before.

My spirits had always been singularly dependent on atmospheric influences. The warm, sultry days of summer oppressed me; the rain of that season irritated me. But with the first breath of autumn all languor vanished — life was strong within me; I braved all weathers, and no day was too cold, no snow sufficient to detain me indoors. If I could not enjoy my usual promenade, from which the pouring winter rains, common in our latitude, at times debarred me, I would throw a shawl round me, and walk up and down the porch of our house rapidly, until I was all aglow with the exercise.

So it was well for me that this day, my day of first bending my shoulders to the yoke of labor, should be clear and bright; for had it been otherwise, I fear that, like the ancient Romans, I might have deemed it an evil augury, and been superstitious enough, like them, to await a more fitting season.

I met with a warm welcome from Mr. and Mrs. Merton. I have already described him. She was a sweet, motherly woman, not her husband's equal in intellect; for, though gifted with that rare thing, practical common sense, she was not clever; but in all kind thoughts, all sweet, womanly kindnesses, a fitting mate for him.

"You are a brave girl, Sidney," Mr. Merton said, approvingly, as I rapidly detailed my plans to him, ending by showing him Mr. Powers' letter and an advertisement I had hastily written before leaving home. "Under the circumstances, it is the best thing you can do —"

"We need a good teacher in town," Mrs. Merton interrupted. "Sidney will soon have her choice of scholars, and first on her list I will put our Carrie."

I thanked her warmly.

"How are you to get your other pupils?" Mr. Merton asked.

"I thought of going among our friends."

"You will do nothing of the kind. Don't begin by making yourself cheap, Sidney. Let people think you are doing them a favor; in short, show you feel your own value; and, my word for it, you will have more pupils than you can manage."

"Then I need only attend to my advertisement?"

"I'll see to that for you. A newspaper office is not a very pleasant place for a young lady to visit."

"And my advice is this, Sidney," Mrs. Merton interposed; "ask a fair price at once for your lessons. You had better have ten pupils at a fair rate than twenty at a lower."

I laughed. "My reputation is yet to be made."

"But, my dear girl, you are fully competent, and why should you slave yourself to death?"

"My wife is right, Sidney," Mr. Merton said to me. "You want a reasonable income, and there is no reason in the world why you should not have it."

"I hope I am not unreasonable," I said; "but I want to earn enough for my mother and myself. She is too delicate to work; and you know," I continued, trying to smile, "I must take my father's place with her."

"True," Mr. Merton said, thoughtfully; "yours is the stronger nature."

We talked the matter over thoroughly. At last I got up to leave. Mrs. Merton insisted on my remaining to dinner.

"Impossible! My mother is alone."

"I had forgotten that. Go, Sidney; I will not detain you."

I lingered a few moments to settle the hours for Carrie's lessons, and then started for home.

My walk home was more cheerful than the walk an hour or two before had proved. It was a great relief to my mind to find that our friends approved of my intentions, and Mr. Merton's advice, soothing as it did my own proud feelings, was decidedly satisfactory.

"Mother," I said, when the evening paper was brought in, "I'm afraid I shall shock some of our good people."

"What do you mean, Sidney?"

"Don't you know some wiseacres think that a woman should be such a nonentity, that the public should be in total ignorance of her existence, save when the papers tell of her marriage or of her death, on which two special occasions, her name is allowed to appear in print?"

She put down her work, some delicate, fancy knitting, and looked at me.

"Oh, there's nothing wrong!" I hastily resumed; "only I'm in the paper to-night, and I wanted to see what you thought of it."

And I pointed to the advertisement, which set forth, in the usual phraseology, that "Miss Sidney Elliott, desiring to form a select class of pupils for musical instruction, offered her services to the citizens of Fairfield and vicinity." Mr. Merton had added his own and Mr. Powers' names as references.

"Put it away, Sidney," she said to me; "I don't like to see it."

"Now, mother! as if a little work would hurt me."

"It is not that," she said, quietly. "I cannot bear to think of the change it makes in your worldly prospects."

"I care nothing for that," was my proud reply. "A crust I had myself earned would be sweeter to me than luxuries given by another."

CHAPTER V.

SUNDRY MATTERS.

I SOON found out the worth of Mr. Merton's advice. By standing a little on my dignity — no very hard task, by the way — I enhanced my own value. Human nature only values things in proportion as they are difficult to obtain. Give a child a toy, it soon wearies of it; let the same article be made a subject of prohibition, and it will immediately become most precious. And the selfsame rule applies to children of a larger growth.

Before the winter was over, I had as many pupils as I could do justice to; and more, I would not take. My income was amply sufficient for my wants.

I learnt too, the truth which I wish all women could learn, that happiness is best found in occupation. There is no surer cure for grief, no better panacea for listlessness. My time never hung heavily on my hands, and my hours of recreation were only the more precious.

But I was driven to it. To those who, unlike myself, are at liberty to dispose of their time at their own will, I can only say, let them find some occupation which will interest heart and head, and we will find fewer listless, discontented girls, fewer weary, disappointed women. There would be less gossiping, less ill-feeling — in a word, the tone of society would be raised. Why should woman be content to fold her talent in a napkin? Not that I am any advocate of woman's rights, female suffrage, or any of that nonsense. I only say to my countrywomen, throw off the trammels of fashion — dress and

indolence — cultivate your minds as you now do your persons, and you will be amply repaid.

I did not learn all this at once. At first, I greatly rebelled against my position. Naturally indolent, the drudgery was hateful to me; and the feeble efforts some of my pupils made at music — music, did I say? it was not music — were torture to my sensitive ear. I sometimes wished for deafness; for a false note grated on my musical sensibilities as a halting line offends the ear of a poet, or as two colors which do not agree are a painter's aversion. I hated to hear unskilled fingers stammering through the great poems of sound, bringing discord, not harmony, from the ivory keys. Often I have felt tempted to push aside the pupil, and, taking her place, play the piece which, to me, was but a simple form of notes to which my fingers would give soul, and inspire them with something of the true spirit of music.

But if my musical ear was thus offended, my pride, too, was often hurt. This was often done unintentionally; but at times the patronizing, condescending manner of some of my acquaintances would bring the blood to my cheek, and set every nerve thrilling.

There was one house to which I went, in my capacity as teacher, which I always left feeling as though I had passed through a sort of conflict. Mr. Cameron was a self-made man, one of our chief merchants. So far as he was concerned it did not matter, for I was seldom thrown into contact with him; but his wife and eldest daughter, a girl about my own age, were my special aversion. I never went there to give a lesson, and I had two pupils in the family, that either Mrs. Cameron or Annie did not find some occasion to make me indignant.

“And are you fully reconciled to your position?” Mrs.

Cameron would say. "Such a pity as it is, Miss Elliott!" And Annie Cameron, with her lady-like manner, which concealed much quiet impertinence, and which was even more unpleasant to me than her mother's ill-bred condolence, would always reply:

"Then, mamma, you should be only too glad that you can avail yourself of Miss Elliott's services. You know they are invaluable."

I imagine they knew no better. But it was hard to bear.

However, this was only one case. In nearly every family where I taught, and I taught chiefly among our old friends, my loss of fortune, and consequent obligation to labor for my bread, made no difference. For our people in Fairfield thought labor no disgrace, and we did not estimate a man or a woman by the length of their purses.

Fairfield itself was a quiet enough place. A city it called itself, and its size was such as to entitle it to the name; but any one coming from our seaboard cities, with their busy, noisy streets, would have thought himself in an overgrown country-village. For twenty years it had stood still; and, in spite of its many natural advantages, its good situation for manufactures, its position on one of the chief railroads of the state, like Rip Van Winkle it had gone to sleep, and with no prospect of awakening. Its inhabitants were content to go on in the same old routine, year in and year out; innovations were regarded with suspicion, and did any enterprising stranger happen to come into the place, he was very sure, ere long, to settle down as quietly as that respectable individual, "the oldest inhabitant."

The town itself was most beautifully situated: completely surrounded by hills, none very high, which

formed a beautiful rolling country, with here and there a sparkling limestone stream; well-cultivated farms, comfortable farm-houses, with their well-filled barns, and herds of sleek cattle; the whole forming, as I have often thought, a picture equalling in beauty the far-famed rural districts of England.

I used to sit at my window, looking out upon the country, for we lived almost out of town, and feast my eyes on the fair prospect before me. The hills in the distance blended their misty blue outline with the horizon, with sun and shadow chasing each other over the green slopes, on which I watched the snows slowly melt in the spring, varying from the pure white to the emerald green of the growing wheat. The trees in autumn, in their gorgeous livery, rivalling the brilliant hues of sunset, brightest before death, formed a fit enclosure for the town, which, with its shady streets, lay in the midst of this beautiful country.

Our people had shown good taste in planting the streets chiefly with the maple. Its cool, vivid green is grateful to the eye in the heats of summer; and in the fall, its leaves change to crimson, scarlet, and orange. I have seen a maple-tree one mass of golden leaves, save one bough, which, in contrast, wore the most vivid scarlet. Then, perhaps, you would find one which, retaining its green foliage, tipped every branch with gold. Another would stand glorious in orange, scarlet, and green. And so on, in endless variety.

The trees gave the town its only claim to beauty. There were only a few handsome buildings in the place. Even the churches lacked architectural beauty. They were striking evidences of the utilitarian, economical spirit of the people.

Still there was much solid comfort in the place. The wealth of Fairfield was very evenly distributed, and the people were proud of their comfortable homes. With a few exceptions, the ladies devoted themselves wholly to their household duties. Social visiting was scarcely known; there was little or no entertaining; and, in a word, it was as quiet a country town as you well could find.

Yet I was attached to Fairfield. It was my birth-place, and here my whole life had been spent. I was accustomed to it. And, after all, what matters it? Our fate, whatever that may be, will find us out under any circumstances. We need only be patient, and wait.

Just now, however, I did not trouble myself about the future. My earnings were amply sufficient for the wants of our small household; and, while performing to the best of my ability the duties each day brought, I “took no thought for the morrow.” I had never been given to day-dreaming—my views of life were too practical for that; so I went on from day to day, thinking, if I did think at all on the matter, that

“There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will.”

I was something of a fatalist.

CHAPTER VI.

THE RETURN OF SPRING.

SPRING came, that year, unusually early. I had looked on the hills, white with winter's snowy mantle, one bright, sunshiny day, and a week later they were green with the young grass. In brighter emerald lay the wheat-fields; and walking through my garden, everywhere along the borders, crocuses, hyacinths, and snow-drops already began to send up their green leaves.

My love for flowers amounted to a passion. My father's chief recreation had been found in his garden, and I was always ready to follow him there. I was more familiar with those sweet leaves from Nature's volume, flowers, than with the books with which, now-a-days, the world is flooded. I watched the growth of every leaf, the unfolding of every bud; and while I was always glad to give my flowers to my friends, I could not bear that any hand save my own should pluck them. My mother used to say that my father and I knew every plant, leaf, and bud that grew in our garden. It was true—not a flower could open or fade, not one could be gathered, without our knowledge.

My dear father! how I missed him now! How every moment recalled him to me, as I silently labored among the flowers. Those pleasant gardening hours! our long congenial talks!—alas! they were forever over.

Day by day, spring advanced. The early flowers bloomed and faded, the apple-trees covered themselves with a snow of blossoms; and I little cared, as I went

on with my daily tasks, for what the future might hold in store for me.

But my quiet days—those days to which, hallowed as they were by the mourning for my father, I was afterwards to recur as days of peace, so tranquil were they—were nearly over. I look back on them now as a season of calm; for the storm of grief which had rushed over me at my father's death was lulled, and, dear as his memory was to me, I could at last think of him without pain.

One bright morning, when Nature looked her loveliest, wearing her brightest green, as yet untouched by the dust of summer or faded by the sun—when the apple-trees, like giant nosegays—(did you ever examine a cluster of apple-blossoms?—the delicate expanded flower in the centre, surrounded by the almost crimson of the buds, is something exquisite)—sent everywhere their sweet perfume, while from the hedges of lilac and syringa—a prettier name than mock-orange—came the shrill whistle of the robin, or the song of the cat-bird, our Northern mocking-bird, whose sweetest notes always end in a harsh imitation of the animal whose name he bears, yet whose familiar manner renders him, in his Quaker coat, welcome; and everywhere hopped and chirped the busy sparrows, in their variegated brown plumage; for the air was alive with these feathered minstrels, or, as some English poet calls them, “winged joys”—I set out on my usual round.

My mother followed me to the gate.

“Sidney, I cannot bear to have you leave me to-day.”

“My dear mother! and why?”

“I don't know,” she said, sadly. “If I did not know that it was absolutely necessary you should go, I would keep you at home.”

"I can only promise to come home as soon as possible," I said; "so don't worry yourself, mother dear, and I will return with all the gossip of the town to delight your ears."

I hated to leave her so much alone, yet what could I do? She had become so wholly dependent on me, that I knew the hours of my absence were very hard for her to bear. Once I asked her why she held me so precious.

"My child, you are all I have left," was the quiet reply, and the calm eyes filled with tears.

I never asked the question again; for by my father's grave were two little mounds—all that was left of a brother and sister I had never seen; for I was the youngest born, and the widow clung to me, the last of her loved ones left.

My task that morning was unusually light. Two of my pupils were out of town, and I, not sorry for the interruption and the unexpected leisure, went to Mrs. Merton's, there to spend my spare time.

She seemed glad to see me. "I was just wishing for you, Sidney. We are to have an addition to our family."

"Who is coming now?" I asked; for I knew that theirs was a house where there was a constant coming and going, and that it was but seldom the family sat down to table alone.

"It is no passing visitor this time," she replied, as I thought, seriously. "A niece of Mr. Merton's is coming to make her home with us. She is the child of his only sister, and has been boarding for two years past at the school where she was educated; for she is an orphan; and in those years has entered into all the gayety and dissipation of a fashionable city life."

"So you will have a gay young lady here?"

“Yes. John thinks, as he is her guardian, this ought to be her home, and she will be here to-night. I shall depend upon you to be a companion for her.”

“Not a very congenial one, I fear. My quiet ways will scarcely suit a fashionable young lady.”

“You will find her very attractive, Sidney. I have not seen her since she was fifteen, and even then her manner was that of a polished woman of the world. Meta Gray is no ordinary girl.”

“Dear Mrs. Merton! I believe you are half afraid of her.”

She laughed herself. “I believe I am. I am so accustomed to our quiet ways, that I almost dread the change it will make. I’m glad neither of my girls are grown up.”

So we sat talking—for Mrs. Merton, though so much older than myself, was one of my best friends—till I had to leave her; for my watch told me I must meet my other pupils. But I was not suffered to depart until I had promised that a few days should bring me to call on Meta Gray.

“I am glad, Sidney,” my mother said to me that evening, as we sat together after our tea, “that you will at last have a companion of your own age, one whom you will find congenial. You have lived too much among older persons.”

“And I like their society best,” I said. “I could have no better friend than my own mother.”

“Still, Sidney, ‘like loves like.’ My age removes me from you; and although I know you love me very dearly, more than any one else in the world, you will find that a friend of your own age will greatly add to your happiness—the more so that you have no sisters.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know; but I doubt if

Meta Gray and I are ever more than mere acquaintances."

"I hope it may prove otherwise."

I was shy of meeting strangers, and I fairly dreaded meeting Miss Gray. From the friendship between us, for which my mother and Mrs. Merton hoped, I almost shrank; still I felt some curiosity to see the young lady, and it was with very mixed feelings that I prepared myself, a few days later, for Carrie Merton's music-lesson, knowing I should then meet the new inmate of that hospitable house.

CHAPTER VII.

META GRAY.

META has come, Sidney," was Mrs. Merton's greeting to me as I stepped into the sitting-room. "And I was very silly to be afraid of her, for she is just as lovely! — But you must see her for yourself. Carrie, go and call your cousin." She spoke to her daughter, a bright girl of twelve.

"Not yet, Mrs. Merton," I hastily interrupted. "Let me give Carrie her lesson, and then I am at your service." And I carried my point. But the lesson was barely over, when Mrs. Merton and Miss Gray entered the room.

"I hope you will be good friends," the elder lady said, as she named us to each other.

"I have heard so much of Miss Elliott, and know her so well by reputation," said a soft, silvery voice, "that I shall do my best to carry out Aunt Mary's wishes."

She was one of the loveliest creatures I had ever beheld. A slight, yet rounded figure; the limbs delicately moulded, with tiny hands and feet; a complexion like a baby's, pure pink and white; little, pearly teeth, half hid, half revealed, by the pouting scarlet lips; and a wealth of hair, true auburn, glinting into gold in the sunshine — such hair as the old Italian painters loved to paint, and which, in its rich luxuriance, rippling all over the small head, and carelessly knotted behind, falling into a mass of curls, would have been an artist's delight. But the eyes were

the strangest! Darkened as they were by long lashes, deeper in hue than the hair, they were almost green, such eyes as I had read of, but never before seen. Soft, clear, dreamy eyes, their wonderful mixture of gray and green gave the girl a strange, weird look, a fascination I cannot describe; and, in gazing upon Meta Gray, you forgot her beauty, her form, her hair; you only thought of her eyes, and the strange glances they cast on you.

“What is the matter, Miss Elliott? or may I call you Sidney?” she asked, laughing, as I stood before her.

Her words recalled me to myself. I had yielded to the fascination of those eyes, until I had wholly forgotten my duty as a lady.

“I beg your pardon, Miss Gray. For a moment, I forgot myself. And how can I apologize?”

“Give me your friendship, Sidney.” We were alone, for Mrs. Merton, after the introduction, had left us together. “I am an orphan—alone! I have no sister—nor have you! let us fill the place of sisters one to the other.”

The wondrous eyes swam in tears; the low, thrilling voice, siren-like, was in my ears, and, girl-like, I promised her the friendship she asked.

“Do you sing, Sidney? With this brow,” passing her hand over my forehead as she spoke, “you should have musical abilities.”

“I have no voice,” I replied; “my music is all in my finger-ends.”

“And I can just pick out my accompaniments; so that we can assist each other.” She turned to the open piano, as she spoke, and striking the opening chords, sang a line or two of “Allan Percy.”

Her voice was a rich, pure contralto, thrilling and trem-

ulous, every note falling round and full, "like pearls on scarlet velvet," true as the tone of a silver bell. I listened, entranced, and as she paused, I begged her to continue.

"No!" she said; "I hate the song, 'tis but a foolish, love-sick ditty. I only sing it because there are so few songs within the compass of my voice. The soprano was ever the favorite with composers." She selected a piece of music from the pile on the piano. "Play this accompaniment for me, and I will sing for you."

It was Schubert's "Serenade." And it was sung with feeling—with an expression wholly indescribable. As I struck the last chords I felt my eyes were dim.

"You foolish girl!" she said, lightly. "What do you find in music, mere sound, so to move you?"

"It is the voice of the soul!" I exclaimed, with energy.

She paused. "I cannot understand it. But my singing has a strange effect on many. Music, in itself, is nothing to me. I never grow enthusiastic over it—never feel the power some say it possesses; I only prize my voice as a means of shining in society."

"It would be far more to me," I said. "To me, the power of giving utterance by my voice to the noble compositions of the great masters, to awaken the soul hidden in those great tone-poems—"

"You are enthusiastic, Sidney. I am too commonplace to appreciate your rhapsodies."

Her tone recalled me to myself. "I beg your pardon, Miss Gray. I forgot we were strangers."

She looked askance at me, her eyes half closed. I do not know why, but I irresistibly thought of that singular creation of Holmes, "Elsie Venner." My eyes fell under her searching look.

"We must not be strangers, Sidney. Remember, we are to be friends."

And, after a few brief sentences, we parted. It was a strange first call. Meta Gray was something so totally different from any one I had hitherto met, that she puzzled me. Would I ever understand her thoroughly—would we ever be friends? While with her, feeling the fascination of her manner, I should have answered yes, unhesitatingly. Away from her, I could say nothing.

I was but a poor teacher that day. Meta Gray's voice yet sounded in my ears, her mysterious eyes haunted me, and I longed to be alone, to analyze my own feelings.

"What do you think of her?" my mother asked, as I spoke of our meeting.

"She is beyond me. Perhaps, when I know her better, I can answer you. As it is"—I paused.

"You are not often so undecided."

"I am imaginative to-day, mother. I doubt not but that Miss Gray will turn out, after all, to be only a pretty girl with a fine voice, and I shall wonder at myself for thinking her anything else."

I did not see Meta for several days. At last, as I left Mrs. Cameron's one morning, I met her.

She looked beautifully. Her airy muslin dress of pale green, her light hat trimmed with a wreath of leaves, were singularly becoming.

"Why have I not seen you before?" she asked. "Aunt Mary has been wondering what had become of you, and I wanted you."

"My time is not my own," I replied. And, showing her the roll of music I carried, I added: "My pupils require most of my attention."

"I had forgotten! How can you, with your love of music, stand it?"

Now, from any one else, I should only have considered this speech impertinent. But her tone was so sympathetic, so full of interest, that I answered her: "Is it not a pleasure to labor for those we love?"

"Look at that insect, Sidney!" was the irrelevant reply, as a butterfly, with his bright, yellow wings, fluttered over the fence of a garden, gay with roses, by which we were now walking. "Like him, I am a creature of sunshine, unfitted for the storm, caring only for the flowers of life—while you"—she paused.

"You are right," I said, rather bitterly; "you—gay, bright creature that you are, what have you to do with me—the sober worker?"

"Now you are angry," she laughed. "I did not mean to offend you—you 'dark ladye!' Come, smooth your brow; here we are at home, and I promised Aunt Mary that I would bring you home to dinner. Your mother knows you are to be here, so you must come."

Her hand was on mine, her gentle manner won on me, and I yielded.

"You are a very enchantress," I said to her, as, our wrappings laid aside, we sat in the cool parlor. "Now sing for me; for as you have enticed me here, you must entertain me."

She obeyed me like a child; and I sat listening to her, wholly forgetful of the flight of time, till we were called to dinner.

"Oh, Mrs. Merton," I exclaimed, "it is a transition from poetry to prose, from romance to reality."

"A very agreeable reality," Mr. Merton said, in reply to my rather remarkable speech. "We are not all as crazy on the subject of music as you are. How is it, puss?"

He was pulling Meta's curls as he spoke.

"I don't like your pet name, uncle," was her pouting reply.

"It just suits you, Meta," he said. "Playful and graceful as you are when pleased, I doubt not but that, like puss herself, you can, under the velvet, show your claws."

"How can you, John?" his wife interrupted. "Don't mind him, Meta; he is only teasing you."

But I did not like the expression on her face. She bit her lip to conceal its tremor. It was only for an instant, and she was mistress of herself; and during our meal she was the life of the table.

"I am so glad you two like each other," Mrs. Merton said to me, as we stood for a moment together. "Come to us when you can, Sidney; it will be good both for Meta and yourself."

"She is very fascinating," I replied; "I don't wonder that you like her."

"What are you two discussing?" the silvery tones asked. She had, noiselessly as a cat, come behind us. Mrs. Merton laughed. "We were scolding you, Meta."

She looked up archly. "I'm not afraid of that; nobody scolds me. Auntie, I'm going to walk part of the way with Sidney."

"You can't go very far with me, sprite. I've a lesson to give in the neighborhood."

"And, indeed, Meta, you should stay at home to see our friends."

"Callers! stupid callers! what care I for them?"

"Meta, you are incorrigible! Sidney, you will have to give her some of your sedateness."

So Meta and I walked off together.

"Are you ever at home?" she asked, after we had reached the house at which I had told her she must leave me.

"Not often," I replied; "only before nine in the morning, and not till after six in the evening."

"Then I will come to see you when I can find you. Are you an early riser?"

"Come and see," was my reply; and, with the declaration that the next morning would find her at our gate, she left me.

Annie Cameron stopped me on my way home. "Have you met Miss Gray?" she inquired.

My answer was very brief: "I have."

"So have I," she rejoined. "She is quite an acquisition to our society. I have just invited her to a little musical party at our house, and was on my way to ask you to join us."

"Thank you," I said; "but my dress must plead my excuse."

She expressed her regret civilly, but did not press me.

"I am indebted to Meta for that invitation, I suppose," was the only thought I gave the matter.

CHAPTER VIII.

ANNIE CAMERON'S PLAN.

THE June roses had blossomed and faded ; the wheat was glowing into yellow ripeness in the fields ; spring had passed away, and summer was rapidly waning. It was my brief vacation ; and, though the heat was most oppressive, I fairly luxuriated in the leisure it gave me.

Meta had won my mother's heart. To her she was ever soft, gentle, and caressing, and she was always sure of a ready welcome to our dwelling. So we were thrown much together, and my mother laughed at me for saying there was something strange about her. The truth was, I did not wholly understand her. She kept me constantly on the alert, constantly in doubt, and yet she fascinated me.

"I believe you think her something 'uncanny,' " my mother said to me one day. "You are the only person in town who does not consider her charming."

I was silent, for I could not explain myself—not knowing what to think, not thinking, but feeling, for I believe I was led mostly by instinct, if I may be allowed to use the word. Meta was very popular. She was a universal favorite. She sought my society ; and though, while with her, I was ready to join in the popular verdict, away from her I wondered at her power over me.

I was spared reply, which would have been difficult,

by the opening of our garden-gate, and the entrance of Meta herself, accompanied by Annie Cameron.

"No, indeed! let us sit here," Annie Cameron said, in reply to my mother's invitation to come in. "Your porch is so pleasant that we will not disturb you."

So my mother brought out more cushions—for she and I had been sitting together—and the two girls sat down.

"What have you been doing with yourself, Sidney?" Meta asked. "Why do you keep so much to yourself?"

"I am enjoying the pleasure of doing nothing," I said, lightly; "that is a pleasure you and Annie don't at all understand."

"I beg your pardon," said the latter, shrugging her pretty shoulders; "I know so much about it that it has ceased to be a pleasure, and become wearisome."

"If your moments of leisure were as few and far between as mine," I said, "you would appreciate them as I do. For the past few weeks I have fairly luxuriated in idleness."

"You have fairly earned it, too," Meta smiled.

"She is not idle, even now," my mother said. "Look at our garden, Annie. It owes all its beauty to Sidney's care."

And it really was beautiful. Though the roses' first bloom was over, though the lilacs no longer unfolded their fragrant purple and white pyramids of bloom, and the early bulbs had long since faded, it was a wilderness of blossom. Tall gladioli, in their varied colors; clusters of pinks, and bright annuals, growing in profusion along the borders; fuchsias with their graceful bells; the sober, yet sweet mignonette and heliotrope; and, in the morning, the beautiful flowers of the morning-glory—there is a whole poem in that name—with the more delicate ipo-

mœa, and the scarlet and white cypress, their airy tendrils intertwined over frames of rustic-work, formed a picture of whose beauty I never wearied.

"My garden duty is not work," I said. "That is my pleasure—a kind of busy idleness."

"And do you take care of it all yourself?" Annie asked.

"I do," I replied, for I was proud of my flowers. "It is one of my chief pleasures."

"I have no luck with flowers. They never 'do any good,' as the saying is, for me. I wish you would give me a little of your skill."

"You probably kill your plants with kindness," I answered. "There is a good deal in judicious letting alone—plants do not like rough handling."

"Yet most gardeners advocate the free use of the knife."

"So do I—to keep things in proper bounds. But the best teacher is love for your flowers, and they amply repay you for your care."

"She knows each one individually," my mother said. "Were you to gather a bouquet, she could tell you where each flower in it grew."

"We don't intend putting you to any such test, Sidney," Meta interposed. "Annie and I came on business, and we have not yet said one word on the subject."

"Make her promise to consent first," Annie interrupted.

"Oh! we will take no denial," Meta said, gayly. "So, Sidney, you may as well surrender at discretion."

"I make no promises blindly," I said, in the same tone. "What are you bent on now?"

"You tell her, Annie; I'm not good at explaining."

“Our design is on the purses of the community, Sidney. We want to raise some money.”

“How? and for what purpose?”

“The first shall be last. For what purpose? We wish to re-organize our choir, which you know is miserable; and the first thing to be done is to purchase an instrument.”

“Easily said, less easily done,” I observed. “What steps do you propose to take?”

“I am coming to the point. Some of the gentlemen say, that if the ladies will raise half the amount necessary, they will furnish the other half. Stingy fellows—they might as well give us the whole at once.”

“Cannot you raise it by subscription?”

“No—that is forbidden. And we don’t want a fair. So we intend getting up a concert.”

“And we want you to join, Sidney,” Meta put in. “You are the best musician of us all. Mrs. Elliott, tell her she must work with us.”

My mother laughed. “She will not refuse you.”

But I was not at all anxious to join them. I knew a good deal of hard work would fall upon me—that I should be accompanist in general; and I did not feel disposed to give up so many hours of my brief holiday. All my arguments were over-ruled, even my mother siding with the girls, and there was nothing left but to yield as gracefully as I could.

“I am so glad!” Meta said to me. “We could not have gotten along without you, and it will be quite a pleasant change from the monotony of the town.”

“Fairfield is certainly very dull,” Annie observed. “Our practicings will, I think, be very pleasant, and the first is to be at our house next Thursday evening. And,

by the way, we shall then have Will at home. You remember him, I suppose."

I did not, and I said so. Will Cameron, after graduating at Yale, had remained there to pass through the law school, and he was now returning home to practice in his native place.

"Who form your party?" I asked, as the girls spoke of leaving.

Ten or twelve names were mentioned. "You have left out Lewis Perkins," Meta corrected.

Annie's cheeks were crimson. Now, if there was any one in this world I detested, it was this Lewis Perkins. Lewis Cass, as his loving parents had named him—why will people desecrate the names of our great men by bestowing them on nonentities?—was a stupid creature, whose only redeeming point was his good-nature. Character, he had none; no energy, plenty of conceit, too obtuse to see his own unpopularity, extravagant—in a word, what our good people in Fairfield were wont to call "dooless." He was short and stout, with a reddish beard, and had there been the faintest trace of expression in his face, it might have been called handsome, but it was a perfect blank. And this man had been for some little time devoted to Annie Cameron. Though she was no favorite of mine, I thought her worthy of a better fate.

"Lewis Perkins!" I echoed. "He lives sixteen miles out of town; and what's more, he can't sing!"

"He thinks he can," Meta interposed. "And poor Annie can't do without him."

"Do hush, Meta!" Annie pleaded.

"Then we meet early on Thursday?" I asked, unwilling to have any discussion. And, the hour being settled, the girls took leave.

It was yet early on Thursday evening when I came down, ready dressed. My mother sat on the porch, a few white rosebuds and geranium leaves in her hand.

"I am so glad you are going out, Sidney; you have been so little in society that this will do you good."

"But I hate to leave you alone," I said, kneeling by her side.

She passed her hand caressingly over my hair. "And I would not be so selfish as to keep you at home. Don't you think I shall enjoy the knowledge of your pleasure?"

"I don't anticipate much pleasure, I am sure. I know everybody so slightly that I almost hate to go."

She smiled. "You will get over that. And, Sidney, don't be *too* dignified. I used to think," she went on, a moment later, "that I should love, had I a grown daughter, to dress and ornament her. But as it is, this is all I can now do for her," and her deft fingers tastefully arranged the flowers she held, in my hair.

"I could ask no better ornament, mother dear," I said. "But I must leave you, early as it is, for I promised Meta that I would stop for her, and Mr. Merton has promised to see me safely home from his house. So don't you sit up for me, or feel worried about me, on this my first evening away from you in what the world calls gayety — more like labor to me!"

CHAPTER IX.

WILL CAMERON.

META was standing on the porch waiting for me, a light shawl thrown carelessly over her arm. She met me with the words:

“You dilatory girl! what has kept you so late?”

“I am sorry I kept you waiting,” I replied. “How well you look!”

She did look pretty. Her dress, such was the art with which it was put on, would have passed muster in any ball-room. Yet it was very simple. A transparent white muslin, through which shone the rounded whiteness of arm and shoulder, a delicate frill of lace at the throat, confined with a cluster of scarlet geranium, a belt of the same hue at her waist, and the beautiful hair bound by a ribbon matching the flowers; such was her dress, plain as my own, yet giving one the impression of something far more elaborate. But Meta lent charms to her costume, she was not dependent upon it. She understood the art of dress perfectly — an art to which I do not wonder that we women attach importance. Men may laugh at us for the time we give to our toilet, the thought we bestow on the “fig-leaves” wherewith we clothe ourselves; yet who more than they, appreciate their effect? What man will not notice, and comment upon, the rumpled hair, soiled collar, or untidy appearance of wife, sister, or friend? And is it not the duty of every woman to look

as well as she ²²²can—to avail herself to the utmost of her natural advantages? Yet her dress should be subservient to her, not she to her dress.

“We are a decided contrast,” she said, smiling. “Your black hair and dress are direct opposites of mine.”

“Night and morning—darkness and dawn—you are making me poetical, Meta.”

We found a gay party assembled at Mrs. Cameron’s. Annie came forward to welcome us.

“Do you know we have all been waiting for you? Sidney, you are president, and should have set us a better example.”

“Ah, Miss Elliott,” Mrs. Cameron murmured, as I stepped forward to accost her. “Glad to see you have time for these meetings; I hear you are prospering?”

“We are all here,” Annie said opportunely, preventing my reply to her mother’s insolent speech. “What are we to do first?”

“Get our pipes in tune!” Kate Strong, a bright, lively girl, whispered in my ear. Then, to Annie, “Had we not best see what our friends can do?”

Meta was the first to reply. “I’m going to make myself generally useful.”

For the next few moments everybody talked at once. “Why don’t the president speak, and bring order out of this confusion?” I heard at last. There was a pause.

“Sidney, they have elected you president: they are waiting for your orders,” Kate said to me.

“I know nothing about it,” I said.

But Annie came forward. “Will you please suggest something, Sidney?”

I drew back, for I was not prepared for this. Meta laughed. “I’ll come to your rescue.—Ladies and gen-

lemen," she began, "as we are about to give a concert, we must find out what our capabilities are—what solos, duets, and trios, to say nothing of choruses, we can undertake. Don't all speak at once." A merry laugh followed this sally.

Then followed a lively discussion on the merits of various pieces of music. I leaned on the corner of the piano, quietly listening, when Meta came up to me.

"Sidney, have you seen Will Cameron? If not, there he stands, talking to Kate Strong. Look at him, and tell me if he isn't handsome."

He well merited her admiration. He was tall and well formed, with straight, clear-cut features, a broad forehead, and deep-blue eyes, almost too soft for a man—one of those (light-haired, tawny-bearded men over whom women go into ecstasies,) and who are always successful in their endeavors to please. I did not like the mouth, which, though shaded by a heavy moustache, was almost too flexible; and the rapidly retreating chin, though the soft, wavy beard was carefully trained to conceal it, told of lack of firmness. The brow was decided enough, but the lower part of the face told a different story.

"Wouldn't he be worth flirting with?" she continued, in the same low tone. "I mean to have an introduction for you and for myself before the evening is over. Isn't he a contrast to Mr. Perkins! If *he* were not such a lump of clay—'only a clod'—I'd talk to him, if only to tease Annie!"

"Meta! how can you talk so?"

"Now hush, Sidney! you like him no better than I do! Listen to him for a minute; horses, as usual, his topic! Well, he is sure of not getting beyond his depth there!"

"You had a long ride, Mr. Perkins," I heard Kate Strong say, as if she was very much bored.

"It was not long," he replied, in his thick tones. "I made the sixteen miles in an hour and a half—pretty fast driving."

"I should think so—for you," was Kate's rather sarcastic reply, as she glanced at his substantial person.

He did not see her mischievous look. "I assure you, Miss Kate, I timed them. My watch is a first-rate time-keeper," drawing an immense watch, more like a small warming-pan than any thing else, from his pocket as he spoke; "although I scarcely ever look at a watch, unless some one asks me the time of day, I used it on this occasion."

"Why do you carry one, then?" was her next question.

"This is not fair, Meta," I began, but I was interrupted by Mrs. Cameron's asking her to sing.

She moved forward to comply, and, selecting a piece from the collection on the instrument, said to me:

"Play the accompaniment, will you—it is too hard for me."

It was Kingsley's "Three Fishers," set to a plaintive, wailing melody, changing in the chorus to the minor key.

(For men must work, and women must weep,
And the sooner it's over, the sooner to sleep—
And good-bye to the bar and its moaning.)

The air suited her voice; and the low, tremulous tone in which she sang the words was very touching.

"How can you sing so?" Kate Strong said to her, as the song, to which all had listened in breathless silence, ended. "I could almost imagine I heard the weeping of the fishermen's wives, and the moaning of the bar,"

Meta made no reply. She was watching Will Cameron, who, after listening intently to the ballad, was now speaking to his sister.

"I sang that for his benefit," she whispered, bending over me under pretence of arranging the music before me. "He is asking for an introduction."

"My brother Wilford — Miss Gray, Miss Elliott."

Meta's bow and smile were as unconcerned as though she had never given Will Cameron a thought.

"What an actress the girl is!" I thought, as I still retained my seat, listening to the gay talk passing between the two.

"What are you doing with a contralto voice," he said at length. "One might as well expect the notes of the thrush from the humming-bird, as those deep tones from such a frail creature as yourself."

She pouted. "How very complimentary you are!"

He was earnest in his disclaimer. "Now, Miss Gray, I only meant to say that I would sooner have expected the high treble notes from you. Miss Elliott should have been the contralto, and you the soprano."

"Unfortunately, I do not sing at all," I replied. "I would give anything for a voice like Meta's."

"She need not wish for it, Mr. Cameron," Meta generously said. "She is an accomplished musician herself."

He bowed to me. "Miss Elliott's management of that difficult accompaniment has already convinced me of that. I wish I dared ask her to assist me at the concert."

"Have you a solo?" Meta inquired. "Do, Sidney, say yes to him. You know you have my accompaniment to play, and we can all practice together."

Annie came forward with a paper in her hand. "What do you think of our selection?"

I glanced over it. Meta had a solo, Will Cameron another, so had I, only mine of course was instrumental. Two or three duets, as many quartets, and a chorus, formed the programme ; the whole ending with the "Star Spangled Banner." It was not a very scientific selection, not pieces I would have chosen myself, yet probably better fitted to please the popular ear.

"I put the last piece in for effect," Annie said, laughing. "And there is room, as you see, for encores."

We were to meet once a week to rehearse. And in four weeks the concert was to come off. So, this important matter settled, the evening went on in various amusements.

Will Cameron devoted himself to Meta and to me. "I am very comfortable here," he said to his sister, who had come in search of him.

"But indeed, Will, you must remember you are in your own house, and be generally polite."

He laughed. "Who wants to monopolize me now?"

"You conceited fellow!" Annie said, as she pulled his short, curly hair. "These girls are tired of you."

"I am at your service under those circumstances," he said, getting up lazily. "Miss Gray, Miss Elliott, you will at least allow me to see you home?"

"Are you equal to the charge?" Meta inquired.

"I will try to be."

"What possessed you to do that?" I heard Annie say, as the two walked off. "Will, I thought you had better sense."

"Is not Miss Gray a great friend of yours?" he questioned.

I lost her reply. But it was just as well ; for as it was, the rest of the evening was spoiled for me.

Mr. Perkins came up, and made an effort to be agreeable. But both Meta and I were glad when the party broke up.

We had a pleasant walk home. "The Three Soloists," as Will Cameron dubbed our trio, were very merry.

"I am sorry we had to leave Miss Gray," I said, as, after bidding Meta good-night, we turned into the street on which I lived. "She is good company."

"She is a very fascinating girl," he responded. "What a magnificent voice she has! I wish contralto and tenor harmonized—I should enjoy singing with her. You two are very intimate," he said, a moment later. "And you seem so different, I can scarcely understand it."

"Our very difference may have drawn us together. Force of contrast, I may say."

"Female friendships!" he said, lightly; "desperate for a while, they usually end in—shall I say it—a quarrel?"

I laughed, in spite of myself, at his comical tone. "It is not likely that Meta and I will ever quarrel. We do not interfere with each other, and cannot you understand women caring for each other?"

"Sisters quarrel, Miss Elliott, and one would say they at least should love one another."

"I have no sisters, Mr. Cameron," I replied to this remark. "Being an only child, I cannot appreciate the force of your last observation."

"At least," he said, as we reached my home, "you will allow me the privilege of a friend, in permitting me to call; and won't you exercise your musical skill in my behalf?"

And I was glad to consent.

CHAPTER X.

FRIENDLY DISCUSSION.

IT was yet early when Meta Gray entered our parlor the next morning. I had stretched myself, most comfortably, on the sofa with a novel, thinking I should be able to indulge in its perusal.

"No, you are not going to read," she said, playfully taking the book from my hand. "You are to talk to me; and, if you are too lazy to sit up, why you may just lie there."

She brought an ottoman from the fireside, and sat down by me. "There! I am comfortable now! I say, Sidney, what did you think of last evening?"

"I have not given it a thought," I carelessly replied. "But now you ask me, I suppose it was like all such evenings."

"And I thought it was charming, especially our walk home. I quite envied you, my dear! you had such an elegant opportunity for a flirtation."

"You know that is not my style, Meta," I said. "I have a thorough horror of anything like coquetry."

"But it would be such fun to tease Annie," she continued, not noticing my remark. "She thinks that brother of hers such a wonderful creature, and he is so conceited, that I would like to prove to both that he is 'as other men are.'"

"Will Cameron is not conceited," I began.

Meta burst into a loud laugh. "So my grave Miss Elliott did have some opinion on the subject!"

"What are you ladies discussing so earnestly?" said a manly voice near us. "I beg pardon for entering so unceremoniously, but I heard your voices, and, the door being open, took the liberty of coming in unannounced. Am I intruding?"

I felt the blood rush to my face as I rose to assure him he was welcome. Meta was silent.

"Have I interrupted a feminine conclave?" he asked, as he took the chair I brought forward for him. "Or are you discussing 'female friendships?'" he continued, with an arch glance at me.

"Don't you believe in them, Mr. Cameron?" questioned Meta.

"Ask your friend, Miss Gray," he said, with a smile. "If she does, I don't."

"For shame!" was her playful exclamation. "I am sure there are as many cases on record of true friendship among women as among men."

He shook his head. "It is not polite to contradict a lady, yet—"

"Mr. Cameron is right there," I said. "Though history gives us such examples of friendship as Orestes and Pylades—Achates, whose fidelity has passed into a proverb—David and Jonathan—where will you find female names so united?"

"Thank you for coming to my rescue! I wish I could always enlist you on my side, Miss Elliott. Miss Gray, do you acknowledge your defeat?"

"I do not. Your historians are prejudiced."

Will Cameron laughed. "You need not look into his-

tory alone. What has been your own experience? have you never changed?"

"I can fight you there with your own weapons, Mr. Cameron. Who is it that says, 'Men were inconstant ever?'"

I laughed. "You have changed your ground, Meta! Love has taken the place of friendship."

"Own your defeat gracefully, Miss Gray. Your position is not tenable."

"It's no use arguing against you two," she said, as I thought, a little angrily. "Sidney, don't you believe in my friendship for you?"

They both waited for my reply. I hesitated for a moment. "I have no reason to doubt it, Meta. Yet, were you ever to marry, I should hold but a secondary place in your regard."

"Let us talk of something else," Will Cameron observed, as a silence of a few moments followed my reply. "Human nature is the same, at all times and under all circumstances, and why need we trouble ourselves needlessly about mere names?"

"What's in a name?" Meta quoted.

"A good deal," I said. "Names have generally meanings and associations. Yours, for instance, has a beautiful significance—a pearl, a daisy."

"Margaret—is that your name, Miss Gray? I thought they called you Meta."

"So they do. But as Margaret was too long for common use, I preferred the rather unusual Meta."

"O pure, pale Margaret!" I never knew the meaning of the name before, though I have always liked it," Will Cameron said. "'As pure as a pearl, as modest as a daisy'—that should be the character it implies."

“It is more than that to me,” I said. “Do you remember Wordsworth’s ‘Portrait’ ? :

‘A creature not too bright or good
For human nature’s daily food ;
For transient sorrows, simple wiles,
Praise, blame, love, kisses, tears and smiles.

.
A perfect woman, nobly planned
To warn, to comfort, and command ;
And yet a spirit still, and bright
With something of an angel’s light.’

I have always thought the original of those perfect lines must have been a Margaret.”

Meta looked up, all her good-humor restored. “I’ll take part of that compliment to myself, Sidney. But names are sad misnomers sometimes.”

She looked the very embodiment of her own name as she sat there. And so I interpreted Will Cameron’s admiring glance at her ere he replied :

“They are indeed ‘misnomers,’ if you think of their meaning.”

“I always do,” I said. “And they are almost always misapplied. Brown Lilies (‘Tiger flowers,’ Meta put in), stately Kates ; flippant, pert Elizabeths — are common.”

“And Martha, ‘careful about many things,’ is generally a poor housekeeper,” was Meta’s laughing remark.

“Your name suits you, Miss Elliott,” Will Cameron said ; “but where did you find it ? ”

“Sidney’s cap fits her,” Meta said. “It is stately and resolute as herself.”

“It was my grandmother’s cap,” I answered. “I like it, though it might as well be given to a man as to a woman.”

"I should never think of anything masculine in connection with you, Miss Elliott," was Mr. Cameron's reply. "I like those old-fashioned names; 'tis a pity they are not more common. But in our discussion, I had forgotten my errand. Will you look over this roll of music at your leisure, and advise me as to my selection?"

"Cannot you try them now?" Meta suggested.

"Impossible! you young ladies have whiled away the morning so pleasantly that I had nearly forgotten an engagement I had at my office. A young lawyer must be punctual."

He bowed as he spoke, and left us.

"You came out in a new character to-day, Sidney," Meta said, as we were left alone. "Really, you were quite brilliant; I had no idea my sober moth could so shine."

"Did I talk too much, Meta?" I asked, for I did not like her tone.

"You played the hostess to perfection! And I must follow Mr. Cameron's example, and be gone."

I pressed her to remain and share our dinner, but she would not consent.

So I took up the roll of music to examine its contents. It contained three songs: "The Serenade," from Don Pasquale; "The Wild Flowers," from Lucia; and Mrs. Hemans' "Captive Knight." I tried them over, and laid the last one aside. As I did so, I could not help wondering what Mrs. Cameron and Annie would have said had they known how their son and brother had passed his morning, or the probability that he would spend several hours with me every week. The concert, and the preparations for it, would necessarily throw us much together.

I spent that afternoon at my piano. I was more anxious about the accompaniments I had to play than about my own piece. *That* depended wholly upon myself. I had selected for my solo an arrangement of our national airs; a piece which, while it displayed the full powers of the instrument, was well fitted for the concert-room. In this choice, however, I was guided by Annie Cameron's programme. My own taste would have suggested something totally different.

"I wish it was all over!" I said to myself as, late in the evening, I closed the piano. "It seems to me that no good will come from it."

Leaving the house, I walked into the garden. The full moon was just rising, the sky was unclouded, the air was heavy with the fragrance of flowers, and, walking up and down the gravel paths, I must have spent hours in revery, till recalled by my mother's voice: "Sidney, child, come in! you will catch your death of cold."

CHAPTER XI.

GLIMPSES OF CHARACTER.

THE weeks before the concert passed rapidly by. They were very pleasant weeks to me. It was the first time I had ever been thrown at all into society, and I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Will Cameron was constantly at our house. He divided his attentions pretty equally between Meta and myself. They would come in the early morning to practice, and, that business over, we would sit together, while he read to us. He escorted us to and from the rehearsals, though, when there, he was all devotion to Meta.

She was very affectionate to me in those days.

"It's a pity I'm not a man, Meta," I said to her one day.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because I believe you would fascinate me into marrying you."

"No, you would not, Sidney, for I would not have you. No," she went on, after a pause; "I like you, as a woman, but I should not if you were a man. As it is, you don't interfere with me, you don't cross me; our lines are totally different, and we don't clash. So I like you."

"What style would you like?" I asked, playfully.

"Something I can control, something I can so guide that he will have no will save mine. But if any one tried to control me —"

"What would you do?"

She raised her head from my knee, where it had been lying. Pushing her hair from her face, she looked at me. I shall never forget the expression of her eyes. Clear, and hard as steel, the pupils dilated, I thought at once of Coleridge's

“Each shrank up to a serpent's eye,
And with more of malice, and more of dread,
At Christabel she looked askance.”

If ever there was a living incarnation of Geraldine, she stood before me.

Did you ever, at one glance, seem to read a character through and through?—to see the true soul animating the person, looking out through its clay prison?—to see, 'neath the fair outside, all the lurking horror within? So I saw Meta Gray; so, in that one glance, I read her, and from that moment I doubted her.

“What would I do?” she repeated, as I sat gazing at her. “What would I do? I would do anything—short of murder!” I cannot describe her tone as she said these words. They were hissed out, beneath her breath. “I believe I have shocked you, Sidney,” she said, a moment later, in her own musical tones. “Don't stare at me so. Are you sick?”

I could have declared I was dreaming. The wondrous eyes, in all their strange beauty, looked into mine—the silvery tones rang in my ears.

“No, Meta, I am well,” I said, rousing myself with an effort. “What were we talking about?”

Her merry laugh rang through the room. “You will forget your own identity next, Sidney. I verily believe you are in love.”

“Not if I know myself. My future lord and master must be something far superior to myself.”

“For instance?”

“A man I can look up to, and respect—a man who can hold his own in the world—who, strong and fearless, can meet the storms of life—who can indeed govern his household—on whose judgment I can rely, submitting to his, my own—in all things my master! Giving to me, as I to him, all true love, all full confidence. I trusting in him, as he in me. To such a man I could give all true service, all wifely duty; working with him, helping him, passing hand in hand through life, ‘each the other aiding!’ And when I find him”—I paused, a little ashamed of my own eloquence.

Meta smiled. “There are no Chevalier Bayards in these days. You should have lived in the times of chivalry.”

“I am as likely to find my ‘fearless and blameless’ knight now as I should have been in those days. Do you remember what Will Cameron said to us the other day, that ‘human nature is the same, under all circumstances’?”

“So you make Will Cameron your oracle?”

“No,” I said calmly, though I felt hurt at her tone. We all know how hard it is to find no sympathy where we most expect it. “No,” I said, “I do not; I only used his words because they expressed my own idea.”

“He would feel complimented!”

“What is the matter with you, Meta? I do not recognize you to-day.”

“Don’t mind me, Sidney! I am not myself this morning. Your calm, quiet nature cannot appreciate or understand the restlessness of mine.”

She was walking up and down the room as she spoke. Suddenly, she paused before me. “What a contrast you

and I make! You, calm, quiet, true woman, as you are; and I, light, unstable, and thoughtless! Yet, of the two, life's sunshine falls to me—to you, its shadows. I, less deserving, gain the admiration of men; and they pass you by. (It is a strange world, Sidney: can you explain it?)"

I was thankful when she left me. If I had wondered over Meta's character before, I was now more puzzled than ever. I had seen her under an entirely new aspect to-day—well for me had it been our last meeting!

Will Cameron spent that evening with me. I have said those were happy weeks—how much of their happiness I owed to him I did not stop to think. My acquaintance with him had opened a new world to me—that of modern literature. My father had limited my reading almost wholly to the older writers, and, consequently, the poets of the present day were unfamiliar to me.

Coming home late, the evening before, from our last rehearsal, we had paused a moment to watch the rising of the Pleiades.

"They rose as calmly in the days of Job," I had said. "Do you remember where he speaks of their 'sweet influences'?"

"They have always been favorites among the poets:

'Many a night, from yonder ivied casement, ere I went to rest,
Did I look on great Orion, sloping slowly to the west.

'Many a night I saw the Pleiads, rising thro' the mellow shade,
Glitter like a swarm of fire-flies tangled in a silver braid.'"

"What beautiful lines!" I exclaimed. "Whose are they?"

"Did you never read 'Locksley Hall'? No? Then I will bring it, and read it to you to-morrow evening."

That was my first introduction to Tennyson. Music and

poetry owe half their charm to companionship — and how soon people learn to know each other through their medium ! Will Cameron was a fine reader, and his well-modulated voice gave new charms to the verse he read. He truly lent

“To the rhyme of the poet
The beauty of ‘his’ voice.”

He threw the book aside at last. “I will leave it with you, Miss Sidney. Tennyson will bear reading alone.”

I took up the volume and turned the leaves carelessly. It opened at that beautiful song in the “Princess” :

“Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean ;”

those lines in which such a deep sadness breathes, one might almost think them written by the shrouded form of some beloved one ; the very utterance of the sorrowing heart — those lines which, all rhymeless though they be, linger in the memory from their very rhythm — those lines which, had Tennyson never written anything else, would have stamped him at once, crowned him at once a true poet.

“What have you found ?”

I pointed silently to the poem.

“Those beautiful lines ! Reading them, we pardon Tennyson many faults. I wonder if they have ever been set to music. I should like to hear Meta Gray sing them.”

“She would do it well,” I said.

“I wish she had been here this evening.”

Now I did not at all coincide in this desire. My morning’s interview with her had upset my usually steady nerves, and I wanted to retain all the composure I could for the next evening — the night of the concert. He went on :

"I want to hear her sing again to-night. After our reading, her beautiful voice would be a fitting end to the evening. Do you remember 'The Three Fishers,' the night we first met? I would give anything to hear it again."

"If you will not be too impatient," I said, lightly, "you can hear it to-morrow evening. It is Meta's solo at the concert."

"You play the accompaniment, I believe?" I assented.

"Perfect music to noble words! Miss Gray shows her usual good taste."

He rose to leave me. "I hope, Miss Sidney, this is not our last evening with the poets; though I can no longer plead the same excuse for coming — practicing for the concert."

"Is an excuse necessary?" I asked, with a smile. "I am always glad to see my friends."

"Then I may come under that category?" he said, gayly. "Thank you, Miss Sidney; we shall meet, then, at the concert; and after that?"

"It will depend on yourself," I said.

"I don't wonder Meta said I had come out in a new character," I thought, after he left me. "I have known Will Cameron four weeks, and I treat him like an old friend. Well, it will end in a few days, and then I must go back to my old routine once more — return to my music-lessons again."

And, for the first time in my life, I envied Meta Gray.

I did not sleep very soundly that night. I felt uneasy and worried about the concert, and my interview with Meta still haunted me. When I did sleep, it was only to dream. I was at the hall, playing my solo. Suddenly

the piano fell towards me ; then, ere it touched me, it changed into a huge spider, which seized me, spite of all my struggles to escape ; and began to imprison me in a net, composed, most unaccountably, of Meta's gleaming tresses.

I awoke, unrefreshed. I looked at myself in the glass. I was pale and haggard, with dark circles around my eyes, and my hands trembled so that I could scarcely arrange my hair. I was nervous and excited.

This would never do. Had I been able, I would have declined taking part in the concert ; but it was too late to supply my place. All the arrangements were completed, and no alterations could now be made. It would, probably, in a pecuniary point of view, be a grand success. The largest hall in the city had been offered us gratuitously, in consideration of the object of our endeavors. Mrs. Cameron had lent her piano, a magnificent instrument, and every ticket was sold. We had decorated our platform with wreaths and flowers, were perfect in all our pieces, and everything had gone on harmoniously. Only one thing had seemed odd to me. Will Cameron, at every rehearsal, had insisted on playing his own accompaniment, laughingly declining the offers of the girls to assist him. What made me think of this I could not tell. The truth was, I had a violent attack of stage-fright. I could only hope it would be over by night.

“What shall I do with myself?” I thought. “A long walk—that will be the very thing.”

So, after my morning duties were performed, I went out into my garden, plucking here a flower, there a leaf, till I had a magnificent bouquet in my hands, which I intended to take to Mrs. Merton.

At her house I found Kate Strong and Annie Cameron. They were in high spirits, and soon made me feel ashamed of my nervousness.

They were discussing their dress for the evening

“We shall all wear white,” Annie said. “Sidney, will you not lay aside your mourning for the occasion? A plain white dress — you need not hesitate about wearing that.”

“I should not feel like myself,” I replied. “I am nervous enough as it is, and a change of my accustomed dress would only the more discompose me.”

“You will feel less strange if you wear our uniform, Sidney,” Kate said, kindly; “but if it be painful to you, we will not press you. It is not a matter of much importance.”

“I will think about it,” I said; “and if you would like it, I can supply each of you with a bouquet this evening.”

They were lavish in their thanks.

“Then,” I went on, “I must go. If I am to be your florist for the occasion, I must not lose any more time.”

“Look your best to-night, Sidney,” Mrs. Merton said to me, as I bade her adieu. “Who knows but that you may make your fortune this evening.”

I arranged my promised floral tributes; then, taking up the volume of Tennyson, I forgot myself over the “*Idyls of the King*.” The afternoon passed away unnoticed.

“Sidney, you have barely time to dress,” my mother’s low voice broke in upon my reading. “It is six o’clock.”

“Six o’clock, and we meet at seven! Oh, mother!”

I was myself again. The morning’s walk, the enchant-

ment of poetry, my quiet afternoon, had restored my self-command. It was just as well now that my time was limited. I would not have leisure to think of myself again.

"I may as well be obliging," I thought, as, after hastily arranging my masses of hair, whose braids nearly covered my head, I took, from its long rest in the wardrobe, a white dress, and arrayed myself in the unaccustomed attire.

CHAPTER XII.

THE NIGHT OF THE CONCERT.

SIDNEY, how well you look!" Meta exclaimed, as I entered the ladies' dressing-room at the hall. "Come and look at yourself."

She pulled me, playfully, before the glass. "Nonsense, Meta; don't flatter my vanity."

But I caught a glimpse of myself. Excitement and haste had given my usually pale cheeks a brilliant color, my eyes were bright, and I felt a pardonable pleasure in feeling I did not look amiss in the white-robed crowd of fair girls around me.

"Do you know you are just in time, Sidney?" Annie Cameron asked, as she pointed to the clock. It was half-past seven. "You have just time to smooth your 'ruffled plumes.' I wonder what the gentlemen are doing? We meet them in ten minutes."

A tap at the door answered this question. "Are you girls ready?" somebody asked. "Because, if you are, you had best come down. The hall is crowded, and it is nearly eight o'clock."

There were a few minutes of bustle and confusion; a flutter of white robes down the narrow staircase, and our party was assembled in the waiting-room. A moment later, and the concert had begun.

I do not intend to enter into a detailed account of it — only those parts in which I was personally interested.

Meta's was the first solo. Will Cameron stepped forward to lead her out.

"You look like the very spirit of song itself to-night," I heard him say in a low tone, as they passed me.

Like all the rest, her dress was white, but she had looped it, here and there, with coral sprays and long, trailing sea-weeds. The same mixture of green and scarlet was in her hair, and the piece of music she held was tied with ribbons of the same hues.

One of the other gentlemen led me to the piano, and then we had the stage to ourselves.

There is rather a long prelude to the "Three Fishers." And, while the ivory keys responded to the touch of my fingers—while, almost mechanically, I struck the heavy chords which open it, passing into a long trill for the treble, while the bass carries the air, then, changing back to the heavier chords, they modulate into the low, trembling arpeggios which form the accompaniment—I looked at Meta.

She stood, to all appearance, unconscious of the crowd before her. The pure color on her cheek never for one moment varied; her eyes were bent on the floor; her white, floating draperies fell gracefully around her; calm, quiet, as she stood there, I did not wonder at Will Cameron's low-murmured question to some one near him:

"Did you ever see anything more perfect?"

"A perfect form in perfect rest!" was the reply.

She heard, as well as myself, for the rose-hue on her cheek deepened, the full, soft, scarlet lips curved slightly with a smile. Then the ballad began. It was an arrangement by Mr. Powers.

I cannot describe Meta's singing of it. The large audience listened, as I did, spell-bound, to the enchanting

notes which filled the hall. Beauty and Music combined their spell.

Through the weird, plaintive notes, through the wailing minor refrain of each verse, the audience followed her. Perfect stillness reigned through the vast assemblage, fearful of losing one tone. Even I, who so well knew her powers, was amazed.

The song was over—and for a moment a breathless silence filled the hall. Meta glided from the stage, leaving me seated at the piano. Then the plaudits burst forth loudly. The audience were not satisfied—they must hear the singer again.

She came forward in reply, looking, as I thought, with her fantastic ornaments, like some sea-nymph. She came to my side for a moment, her eyes flashing, her cheeks glowing.

“I cannot sing that song again, Sidney. How will this do?” It was Schubert’s “Earl King.”

“It will not do at all,” I said, in the same subdued tones. “Sing this instead.” I placed Mrs. Hemans’ “Treasures of the Deep” on the rack.

“That sober thing?”

“Don’t spoil the effect, Meta. This is a fitting sequel to your first song.”

“Have your own way then.”

There was no time for more; I struck the first notes of the song, and the audience were satisfied.

She came to me later, as I sat by the open window in the waiting-room.

“Sidney, did I play my part well?”

“Why do you ask me?” I replied. “Were not the loud applause you received, the low whispers which just now brought the color to your cheek, sufficient?”

“I want your opinion, Sidney. I had but one end in view to-night, and I have attained it. What do you suppose I care for that great monster, the public? Not one iota. I sang with but one thought—to fascinate Will Cameron—and I have done it.”

I made no reply.

“You are a strange girl, Sidney Elliott. Calm and cool as you sit here, the calm is all external; there is a volcano under the ice. I do not know why I seek you. I never sought woman’s friendship before. I gain nothing from my own sex; man gives me the tribute of his heart. I care nothing for the society of women—’t is so tame; and men are little better—poor, weak creatures! A smile, a little flattery, and the strongest of them are at our feet.”

“Meta, have you no feeling?”

“‘All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women—merely players.’”

Am I quoting correctly?”

“You are a thorough actress, Meta.”

She laughed. “Shall I show you the power of my eyes, Sidney? People have told me they are magnetic. Let me put them to the test.”

She looked, as she spoke, at Will Cameron. He was standing at the other side of the room, talking to Kate Strong; and, strange to say, he obeyed the silent summons.

I turned from them to look out of the window. Bright moonlight flooded the earth; not a single cloud was visible; and the stars were pale before the pure lustre of the full moon. What cared they, in their serene Eternity, for the thoughts and passions of a few miserable human hearts?

Annie Cameron's voice interrupted the conversation by my side.

"Will, have you forgotten your solo? It is the next piece on the programme."

"I had forgotten, Annie. Miss Elliott, are you ready?"

"Sidney, do you play the accompaniment?" his sister asked. "Will, I thought you —"

"Would inflict my own playing on our hearers? Not I, puss."

"But Sidney is not prepared."

"I beg your pardon, Annie," I coolly replied; "the piece in question has been thoroughly studied."

He took my hand to lead me forward. Meta whispered in my ear: "I can trust *him* with *you*, Sidney."

"Your hand is as cold as ice," my escort said, as we passed on to the stage. "Are you not well?"

"Well!" yes; but I was sick at heart. I gave a light, flippant answer: "You forget my triumph is yet to come, Mr. Cameron. I will enlist your applause for my solo."

I was not sorry when "The Captive Knight" was over. It was well sung, for both Mr. Cameron and myself were perfect in our parts; but I felt all the time that Meta's and Annie's eyes were upon us.

"This is kind!" I heard him say, as Meta offered her congratulations. "But," in a lower voice, "I am not like that poor knight — my 'dream of hope and joy' is yet to come."

My piece came next. I need scarcely say I did my best. The audience responded, as they always do, to the national airs.

"You will have to go out again, Sidney," Kate said to me. Mr. Perkins stepped forward: "Permit me, Miss Elliott." I had no choice in the matter.

My reply to the encore was "Home, sweet home." And, in a very few minutes more, the concert was at an end.

Mr. Merton came in search of me. Will Cameron was with Meta.

"You have done well to-night, Sidney. You and Meta have certainly been the best performers of the evening."

I received many congratulations as I passed by, on Mr. Merton's arm. Mrs. Cameron stopped me: "You excelled yourself to-night, Miss Elliott. You will find this a first-rate advertisement. And our sweet Meta, too!"

"Our sweet Meta" laughed. "We have earned our organ, Mrs. Cameron."

"And Miss Elliott must preside at it! My dear," to me, "you look tired. I would advise you to go home as speedily as possible."

"She might have given you a seat in her carriage," Mr. Merton said, as we walked on. "Sidney, she is manœuvring to make a match between her son and Meta."

"Well?"

"No, it is not well," he said. "He has not character or decision enough to make Meta a good husband."

"I am glad the concert is over!" I said, abruptly.

Mr. Merton laughed. "You are tired and excited to-night. Why, to-morrow you will not know what to do with yourself."

"My music-lessons recommence in ten days. Mrs. Cameron was kind enough to remind me of them."

"Is that what is troubling you, Sidney? You had better get rid of your excessive sensitiveness. Mrs. Cameron meant no harm, child. We get slights enough in this world, without looking out for those which are not intended. I always thought you a sensible girl."

I made no reply.

“Now Sidney, have I too vexed you? Don't you know I consider myself privileged to scold you, when you deserve it? My dear girl—I am one of your oldest friends—I have seen more of life than you have—let me ask you, if trifles disturb you thus, how will you bear the serious troubles of life?”

“Dear Mr. Merton! as if I could be angry with you! But here is our house; and a good night's rest will probably settle me down again, and cure this raging headache, which must be accountable for all my fancies this evening. Good night, and many thanks for your escort.”

My mother was sitting up for me. I recounted the events of the evening as briefly as possible, and then sought my room. I expected to pass a restless night, but no—far from it. I fell asleep as soon as my head touched my pillow, and did not awaken until the sun was near the meridian the following morning.

“I would not call you, Sidney,” my mother said, in reply to my excuses for my late rising. “You looked so worn out last night that I thought sleep the best thing for you; and I was right, for you are looking quite yourself this morning. But you have missed Mr. Cameron—he seemed disappointed at not seeing you.”

“Mother,” I said, after a moment's pause, “I cannot stay in-doors this morning; will you come out with me? I have something to show you.”

I went out into my garden, where I busied myself for a while forming a wreath of white flowers. With this in my hand, I returned to the house, meeting my mother ready for our walk. I caught up my shawl and hat, and, throwing them carelessly on, we left the house together.

It was a calm September day—a day of mixed sun

and shadow—a day when the air was still, and the clouds were like great white masses in the heavens. To-morrow, the rain might come, the white, floating clouds might form one gray mass, covering the sky, and hiding the blessed sunshine ; but it would be fair to-day.

We walked along, through the less frequented streets. In one of these, not very far from our own home, Will Cameron and Meta passed us. They were out driving. He bowed, and she waved her handkerchief to me as they rapidly passed.

“They will make a handsome couple,” my mother said, as she looked after the two, so young and gay, looking so well fitted for each other. “I hear they are engaged.”

“I should not be surprised,” I said.

We were neither of us in a very talkative mood that morning. My mother was one of those women who possess the rare gift of silence. She never spoke for the mere sake of hearing herself talk. If she could not speak kindly of any one, she said nothing. Scandal never passed her lips. She had strong faith in the old German proverb: “Speech is of silver, silence of gold.”

So we walked along, silently, till we came to our destination, the cemetery. Situated on the outskirts of the city, you heard nothing there of the noise and bustle of the streets. It was kept in perfect order and neatness, a fit resting-place for the silent sleepers who lay there.

The day, I have said, was a calm, still one—so still, in this city of the dead—“God’s Acre,” as the imaginative Germans call it—that only the low sounds of nature were heard. The soft rustle of the falling leaves ; the twitter of the sparrow, the bird which lingers with us through the year ; the light step of the rabbit, as, with long ears

laid back, and white, short tail erect, he bounded over the gravel paths; the low, soft "sough" of the light September wind in the branches of the evergreen cedars, standing here and there in pyramids of verdure, "was all the sound we heard."

Not a word passed between us as we threaded the winding paths. At last we both stopped.

It was before a plain, simple monument—only a square base of granite, on which stood a column, itself unadorned—severely simple. But it did not rise, in all its fair proportions, to its full height. It was broken abruptly off, incomplete—unfinished, as it were, like the noble life it was placed to commemorate.

JOHN ELLIOTT.

BORN MARCH 11, 18—.

DIED NOVEMBER 15, 18—.

"He rests from his labors."

Such was the brief inscription upon the column, such the only epitaph over my father's grave.

It was the first time we had ever been there together. Not that either of us had neglected the spot; but we had always gone alone. The monument had only been completed the day before. It was my own design. I laid the wreath I carried on the base.

"Mother," I said, "were it not wrong, I could almost wish I too slept here."

"You are too young to wish for that peaceful rest, which comes in its own good time. Take up your burden boldly, Sidney; do not let it crush you."

"My life is not a hard one, mother dear. Only I can-

not see why to some all the brightness falls; to others, all the shadow."

"We make or mar our own lives, my child. Had *he* but lived—" Her voice failed.

"Mother, do you think I would call him back—call him from his rest? Rest! when he knows it in all its full perfection—when all the great mysteries of Life and Eternity are solved to him!"

"Let us go home," I said, after a few minutes. "I am better now. After all, what matters sun or shadow, when we know that, in a few brief years, it will all be over?"

We went home, both feeling better for our pilgrimage; for such it was.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TABLEAU PARTY.

IF I had felt any doubt respecting the nature of my feelings towards Will Cameron previous to the concert, that evening awoke me to a full comprehension of their nature; and I was thoroughly provoked with myself. He had given me no reason to suppose he cared for me; every action, on the contrary, indicated his preference for Meta. And because he was the first who had ever shown me any attention, the first gentleman with whom I had ever been on intimate terms, I had been foolish enough to give him my heart.

Fortunately, no one, not even my mother, suspected the state of affairs. I was too proud to show what I felt, and I quietly determined that this, my first fancy, should perish as it had arisen, unseen and unsuspected. It would, I thought, be an easy task. I was almost sure, from Meta's words to me, that they were engaged, and, as I did not suppose that in future I should see much of the gentleman, I imagined it would be easy enough to forget I had ever considered him as anything save a friend.

But I was mistaken in everything. Every morning brought Will Cameron to the house. If he spent his evenings with Meta—of which she never failed to inform me—he was sure to pass his mornings with me. Music, books—he had always some valid excuse for his appearance; and those mornings passed so pleasantly, I had not

the strength to put an end to them. The last day of September came.

"This is the last of our pleasant mornings, Mr. Cameron," I said, as, on rising to take leave, he spoke of some book he would bring me on the morrow. "I am sorry they are over."

"Do you intend to banish me?" he asked.

"I cannot help myself. To-morrow is the first of October."

"What of that? Do you intend to give up your friends because

'The melancholy days have come, the saddest of the year,
Of wailing winds, and naked woods, and meadows brown and sere;'

or do you intend entering a convent?"

"Neither," I said, imitating his tone; "but my brief holiday is over."

"You surely are not a school-girl still? There is not much of what Byron calls 'bread and butter' about you." He was evidently puzzled.

"Is it possible you did not know? My music-lessons begin to-morrow."

"Who is your teacher?" he asked. "Certainly he does not fill up all your time."

"Did you not know I supported myself by teaching music?" I replied. "It is no secret. How is it that you never knew it before?"

"It is news to me, I assure you. Dr. Elliott was generally considered wealthy."

"So we were at one time. But our circumstances have changed since those days."

"And you are dependent on your own exertions?"

"I am very *independent*," I said, with a smile; "more so I could not possibly be."

“You are very proud, as I well know.”

“And that very pride helps me on. I earn my own living, and owe no one anything, not even thanks, for it.”

“You should have been a man, Miss Sidney. I wish I had one half of your ambition.”

“I cannot understand any one’s being without it,” I said, in reply.

He laughed. “I shall immediately proceed to cultivate that quality, that ‘pardonable vice of great minds,’ as some one calls it; and, as a preliminary step, I shall settle myself quietly down in my office, beginning work, like you, to-morrow. What say you, Miss Sidney?”

“Don’t ask me,” I said gayly. “Would not Meta’s advice suit you better than any I could give?”

“It would be very different from yours.” He paused, evidently unwilling to speak of her. “What do you think of our new choir?”

We had secured our organ, at which I had been requested to preside. The choir was composed of Annie, Kate, Meta, and Mr. Cameron—another tenor and two basses filled the number.

“We have first-rate materials,” I said. “I hope they will work well together.”

“It will be a wonder if they do. Choirs are proverbially inharmonious.”

“You and Meta will probably prove the contrary,” I said.

“At any rate, I shall not quarrel with you,” he said, bidding me good-bye.

I was soon busy enough with my pupils. It was very hard, at first, to settle down into the dull routine, after the rush of the last few weeks. Certainly pleasant company was far more agreeable than teaching.

The winter came at last. It was very gay, unusually so. But I did not participate in the gayety. I was kept well informed, however, of all the occurrences of the season, by Kate and Meta. I learned to know Kate Strong well in those days, and she and I were soon friends—a friendship which, I trust, will last our lives through.

So the days passed by till New-Year's Eve. Quiet, monotonous days, with nothing to mark them, yet passing rapidly, as such days will; their only break being Will Cameron's visits, changed now to the evening.

Meta had invited some of us to spend that evening with her. And I resolved to go—Meta would take no denial; and I, imagining that her engagement was to be announced, determined to be present.

Mrs. Merton's parlors were comfortably filled when I got there. The girls were discussing the best means of passing their time. No one seemed in the mood for dancing, charades were voted a bore, and at last some one suggested tableaux.

“The very thing!” Meta declared.

So, good-natured Mrs. Merton was called upon to search her stores, and provide costumes for the merry party. The company was banished to the front parlor, the gas turned low, and the amusements began.

Behind the scenes is generally the most amusing part of such an entertainment. And this proved no exception to the rule. I had declined taking part in the tableaux, but I was called upon to assist in the costuming.

We had ample material to work upon. Mrs. Merton brought down old dresses, worn in days of yore by her grandmother, plumes, flowers, gay scarfs, and our impromptu tableaux were a decided success. We had the

usual list: "Taking the Veil" — "Red Riding-Hood" — "Cinderella" — "A Country Courtship," in which Lewis Perkins took the part of the sheepish lover; and then somebody suggested "Rebecca and Rowena."

"Sidney and Meta will be the very ones," Kate Strong suggested. "Now, Sidney, you need not object; you must act."

And I consented. Meta, in her blue draperies, a long white veil, half concealing, half revealing her features, her beautiful hair falling in natural curls below her waist, was a perfect representative of the fair Saxon. I knelt at her feet, in scarlet robes; my long, black hair braided in two heavy plaits, my head covered with a turban hastily twisted out of an Indian scarf, offering the now despised jewels of the unhappy Rebecca.

There was a low murmur of approbation as the doors were opened, revealing the tableau.

The last on the list was "The Execution of Mary Stuart." I had hastily thrown aside my Rebecca costume, and, winding the heavy braids around my head, hurried to the front parlor to see it. Meta knelt, in flowing robes of black, her hair loosened, her eyes raised, her hands clasped, by the block, near which stood the masked headsman. Two weeping maids of honor, two gayly clad cavaliers, formed the accessory features of a scene which was more like a painting than a hastily gotten-up tableau.

"It is not as good as your Rebecca," Will Cameron whispered to me. "Sidney, I am going home with you to-night. I have something to say to you."

He was Meta's devoted cavalier all the rest of the evening. I was not particularly anxious for the walk home. I expected to be called upon to offer my congratulations,

and I determined to do it with as good a grace as possible.

We were both of us very silent for the first part of our walk. A few commonplace sentences passed between us, and then we relapsed into silence.

We were nearly home when he spoke to me. "I told you I had something to say to you; have you no curiosity to learn what it is?" He slackened his pace as he spoke.

"I am not very curious, Mr. Cameron."

"This is the first morning of the New Year," he began; "and I feel disposed, with its commencement, to begin a new life. I am tired of doing nothing—of wasting my time."

"Growing ambitious?" I asked.

"I want you, Sidney," he said, hurriedly. "I want you to help me, to urge me on. In a word, Sidney, I love you—will you not give yourself to me?"

It was the first time that I had ever thought of the possibility of his caring for me. I could not answer him.

"Have you nothing to say to me?" he presently asked.

"Meta!" I managed to say, in a questioning tone.

"Meta!" he echoed. "What has she to do with this matter?"

"Are you not engaged to her?" I asked, more boldly, for I had found my powers of speech once more. "Mr. Cameron, this is something I never expected."

"I am as free as yourself, Sidney," he said, seriously. "That I have been very attentive to Meta Gray, I do not deny. But, knowing you, dear, how could you think I would give a thought to her? Can you not trust yourself to me, Sidney?"

We were standing on the porch as he spoke these last

words. My reply was to lay my hand in his, while the low-murmured "I can trust you" passed my lips.

"You shall never regret it," he said, as he clasped my hand. "I will see you to-morrow, my darling. For to-night, let this rest between us alone. Good-night, Sidney, *my* Sidney."

His arm was around me; he drew me close, closer to him, till my head rested on his shoulder; and, for the first time in my life, a lover's kiss was pressed upon my lips.

CHAPTER XIV.

NEW-YEAR'S DAY.

MY mother handed me a letter to read across the breakfast-table the next morning. It was from an old student of my father's. He was desirous of settling in Fairfield, and wrote to ask "if Mrs. Elliott had any objections to renting him the doctor's office. Had he not been one of Dr. Elliott's students," he went on to say, "he would not have asked this, but he hoped he would be given the preference in case we desired to rent it." He also wished to know if he could procure boarding in some quiet, private family.

The letter was written in a bold, free hand: it was well expressed—the words well chosen, and not too many. It was signed Hugh Ralston.

"Do you remember him?" I asked, looking up from the paper.

"Yes," she replied; "your father had a high opinion of him, and would have taken him into partnership, had he lived. You were away at school when he was in the office."

"He writes well," I said, "a good, manly hand; and his letter is well expressed."

"I am glad he wants to come here," my mother went on. "It is not to every one I would rent your father's office, or care to see in your father's place. But Hugh Ralston may come; for John liked and

trusted him. And, Sidney, I would like to have him board with us."

"My dear mother, there is no necessity for that."

"I know there is not. But I should feel safer with a man in the house, and he will not interfere with us."

"Please yourself, then, mother. If you wish it, of course it is all right."

"Then I will answer the letter at once."

I cannot say I was at all interested in the prospect. I knew nothing of Hugh Ralston, had never even heard his name. What, indeed, was any man to me, save the one for whose coming I now looked. He did not disappoint me. *He!* as if there was but one "he" in the world to me.

I do not intend to relate our conversation. Lovers' talk is proverbially uninteresting, save to the parties concerned; and, though it may be, nay, *is* very charming to them, I do not know that it is particularly edifying to others.

"Our engagement, I fear, must be a long one," he said, at last; "but not longer, Sidney, than I can help. As soon as I can, I shall claim you."

"I can wait," I replied. "But when you ask for me—"

"Which will, I hope, be sooner than I now anticipate. But, my darling, there is one thing I must ask of you."

"What is that?" I questioned.

"This must be kept secret for a while."

There was a pause.

"I do not like that," I said. "Mr. Cameron, are you ashamed of me?"

He seemed hurt at this. "Ashamed of you, Sidney? Far from it, dear. I am proud of you—prouder than I

can tell you. But it is absolutely necessary that we keep silence. Sidney, cannot we keep our happiness to ourselves, without telling the world, for a short time?"

"There is no necessity for the whole world to know our affairs," I began. "But my mother — your family —"

"They must not suspect it, Sidney. I had best tell you the truth at once. My family are very anxious for my marriage with Meta Gray. My father, if she become my wife, will give me an income sufficient to settle me in life."

"And they would object to me," I said, coolly. "Well, I am as proud as they are. I enter no family unwelcomed."

"They will welcome you heartily at the proper time. Only be patient, Sidney. I will not ask for secrecy one moment longer than is absolutely necessary."

"I do not like it," I began. "I prefer everything to be open."

"I don't like it myself, pet; but you surely trust me, Sidney. Do you not think that I am acting solely in our best interests? Let me get fairly into practice, let me show my father I am not dependent upon him, and that day I will openly say to him: I have chosen my wife; will you not receive her as your daughter?"

I yielded, silenced, though not convinced. "My mother — she must at least be told. I have no secrets from her, Mr. Cameron; and she has a right to know this."

He hesitated. "I wish it could rest between ourselves. Well, tell your mother; we are safe with her."

So even this first interview was not without its thorns.

"I wish I could stay longer with you, Sidney," he

said, as he rose to leave me. "But there is a dinner-party at home to-day, and my mother's last words to me were that I must surely return in time. And let this," slipping a ring on my finger as he spoke, an opal, set in red gold, "let this serve to remind you of me, and that we belong to one another now." A moment later, and I was alone.

Such a day as it was! When Mr. Cameron left me, the sky was one mass of soft, fleecy, gray clouds, floating near the earth. It was not cold; but, ere long, one by one, down came the white flakes, slow and small at first, then faster, larger, till, by night, the air was full of the flying whiteness, and everything lay covered with its cold mantle. I looked out—the lamps burned dimly through the falling snow; there was no sound in the street; and I was glad to turn from the utter stillness of the snow-storm to the peaceful fireside where my mother sat, watching the flickering flame of the anthracite.

"There is no sound in the quiet street,
Not even the tread of passing feet;
And, o'er the earth, a snowy shroud
Falls swift from yonder dark-gray cloud.

"I stand to gaze awhile on the night—
Yet see not even one pale star's light;
I see but the snow-flakes, falling fast,
Hear but the sigh of the wintry blast."

I murmured these lines to myself, as I seated myself by the blaze—always cheerful, more so such a night as this. "We will not light the gas so early, mother. I like to sit here and watch the pictures in the fire." I laid my head on her knee as I spoke. But I did not see the fire—I forgot all save my own thoughts. Need I tell their subject?

My mother's soft hand, smoothing my hair, and her low, sweet voice, at last aroused me. "Sidney, what are you thinking of? Even in this light, I can see how your eyes sparkle, how your cheek is flushed. Every now and then you smile at your own thoughts. They must be pleasant ones, my child: will you not share them with me?"

My face burned. "You are a close observer, mother. It would not do for me to try and conceal anything from you."

"I would never try to force your confidence, Sidney. But no one, save a mother, knows how a mother watches over a child; how every look, every movement is seen. Nothing escapes a mother's eye: there is not a varying expression on your face, Sidney, that I do not notice—not a sigh I do not hear, or a smile I do not see. Child, child, till you are a mother yourself you will never know the full power of a mother's love."

"I can at least fully appreciate and return it," I said, deeply moved by these words from my usually undemonstrative parent. "My thoughts are pleasant ones to-night, mother: you guessed rightly." I let my hand fall by my side as I spoke. As I did so, the gleaming opal on my finger caught my eye. It sent forth a brilliant sparkle in the fire-light. I involuntarily thought, at that moment, of the weird power of Meta's eyes, their opaline lustre, and I shuddered. I rose from my lowly seat, and knelt at my mother's side. "You asked me, mother, to share my thoughts with you. Listen, I have a long confession to make. Do you know," I said, "what I saw in that blazing fire? I saw a home, where my mother was fondly cherished, where she held an honored place. A home which called me its mistress—a home full of home joys

and pleasures—where I led such a peaceful, happy life as you led, before my father was taken from you; and of this life, mother dear, here is the sign.” I laid my hand on her knee as I spoke. The opal on my finger flashed and sparkled—glowing like a thing of life.

“So my daughter has promised herself away! I need not ask who is her choice.”

“You only gain a son, dearest mother. My love for Will Cameron has only increased my love for you.”

We were silent for a long time.

“Mother, this is to be a secret. I could have no concealments from you, but no one else is to be admitted into our confidence.”

“Does not Mr. Cameron intend to tell his family?”

I blushed. “Not at present, I believe.”

“Sidney, I do not like that. You will be placed in a most unpleasant position.”

“I know it,” I replied. “But it would be far worse for him”—and I repeated the arguments he had used to convince me.

My mother shook her head. “I do not like anything underhand, as this seems to be. No, my dear,” as I looked up, “I cast no aspersions on your lover’s character. What little I have seen of him, I like—you know him better than I do—but it seems to me that this is not very manly in him; you are bound, while he, to all appearance, remains free.”

“I can trust him, mother,” I said, earnestly. “I wish I could make you look on it as I do.”

“That would be impossible,” she said, with a faint smile. “But I do not wish to discourage you, Sidney. I have not yet forgotten that I was once young myself.”

“Then you understand, mother, that everything is to

go on as usual. There will be no ostensible change to the world."

"If you are satisfied, Sidney, I suppose I must be ; and I must try and reconcile myself to holding, henceforth, only the second place in my daughter's heart. Well, it is but natural, and I must not complain. I had nearly forgotten a question I wished to ask," she said presently. "You tell me the Camerons are anxious to receive Miss Gray as their daughter, and Will Cameron has surely been very attentive to her for some time—how is that?"

"They are friends, nothing more," was my earnest reply. "I have no fears on that score."

"Your indifference to Hugh Ralston's coming is now explained. Ah! Sidney, it will be hard for me to give you up."

"It will not be for many a long day yet," I said. "You will have plenty of time to accustom yourself to the thought."

I did not think my mother was fully satisfied. She had said but little, but I knew her so well that I could see plainly she had not the same confidence in the future that I felt. I think, with all my natural dislike to anything approaching deception, that the slight appearance of romance the matter wore blinded me, in part, to the indefinite position in which I was to stand. But I was desperately in love with Will Cameron. I had, in my own mind, invested him with all the qualities of the "blameless, fearless" knight of whom I had once spoken with Meta. I had planned for myself a romance, of which he was the hero. Like most girls, I had formed an ideal to myself of my future lord and master, and I was well satisfied with the form in which this ideal had come to me. I was willing to trust to his judgment, to be guided wholly

by him ; and, if he preferred that I should wait—why, so well and good. It would all come out right in the end.

So, with the light heart of youth, with its fearless anticipations for the future, seeing naught save sunshine, dreaming of naught save joy, I slept through the first night of the New Year. I took no thought of what the year might bring. My last thought ere I slept, my first thought ere I woke, was the same.

Was it love, or fascination ?

CHAPTER XV.

A TRYING INTERVIEW.

THE sun shone bright and clear the next morning, as I set out on my usual round, which the holidays had, for a short time, interrupted. I met Annie and Meta, escorted by Mr. Perkins, as I turned into the main street.

Meta left them to join me. "They will only be too grateful for my consideration. I have been trying to find some plausible excuse for leaving them for the last three squares. — Why were you not at Mrs. Cameron's last night?" she asked, after we had remarked on the change in the weather. "Annie told me you were invited."

"I think you are mistaken, Meta. I received no such invitation."

"You missed a pleasant evening," she went on. "'All the world and his wife,' as the saying is, were there. A merry New-Year gathering."

"I heard nothing of it," I said. "My evening passed quietly at home."

"At any rate, you were not out in the storm. Console yourself with that."

"There is nothing like looking on the bright side of things," I said, with a smile. "It is not hard to do, such a day as this."

"I hate winter," shrugging her fur-clad shoulders. "I wish I could live where I never would see snow."

"I like it. This air is perfectly delicious to me."

At this moment Will Cameron overtook us. "I have been trying to come up with you for some time," he said, as he bowed to us. "You are both rapid walkers."

"I must be, perforce," I said. "My time is precious."

"I was at your house this morning, Miss Sidney; but only found Mrs. Elliott at home."

I felt my face flush. He turned to Meta: "I hope you feel no ill effects from last evening."

"I only wish I had a few more to spend like it," was her gay reply. "Sidney, you don't know what you miss by not loving society."

I made no reply. A few steps brought me to my destination. "I must leave you here, Meta, and thank you for your companionship."

I stood on the step a moment before I rang the bell, watching them. Meta's silvery laugh rang through the air, her companion's head was bent down to hers, and I turned, with a half sigh, to enter the house.

"I had a visitor this morning, Sidney," my mother said to me on my return. "Can you guess who?"

"I need not guess," I said. "Mr. Cameron told me he had seen you."

She had endeavored, she told me, to induce him to go openly to his father.

"It would be more honorable, Mr. Cameron; and, besides, it is no more than you owe your father."

He answered her as he had answered me:

"No one can, more than I, deplore the necessity which exists for secrecy; and you may rest assured, Mrs. Elliott, that, so soon as I can, I shall openly claim your daughter."

"It was all very plausible, Sidney," she said to me. "But I must say, I dread the consequences."

A few days more brought Hugh Ralston's reply to my mother's letter. In concise, gentlemanly terms, he thanked her for the offer to receive him into her own family, and stated that, so soon as he could wind up his affairs in his present place of residence, he would come to Fairfield—probably, about the first of March.

I cannot say I particularly liked my own position just now. Will, when with me, was as devoted as I could possibly desire. He spent part of every evening with me, except on Saturdays, when our choir met to practice, and there he was Meta's most obedient servant.

"Not a very pleasant thing," he would say to me afterwards; "but we must not be suspected."

Still less agreeable were Annie's constant remarks. I had, since New Year, seen a great deal of her. She watched her brother intently, and was always much pleased when he and Meta were together. And I had to sit and hear speculations as to the probable engagement of my betrothed husband.

It was a remark of Annie's to me, in the choir, which first opened my eyes to my own equivocal situation.

"If Will is not engaged to Meta, he ought to be. It looks like it, any way!"

"Why don't you ask him, if you wish to know?" I said.

"Brothers are not apt to confide in their sisters," she said, smiling. "But, seriously, Sidney, I think the thing will soon be settled. He spends every evening with her, takes her to every party, and no choice he could make would be more agreeable to us. Look at them now."

Meta was sitting apart from the rest of us, idly turning the leaves of her music-book. Will Cameron sat near, his head on his hand, looking into her face with such evi-

dent admiration that I could not but see it. He had never looked at me in that way.

“It looks suspicious, Annie,” I said, trying to smile.

“Don’t it!” she said, gayly. “They have forgotten everything but themselves. I am half inclined to go and tease them.”

“Stay here, please!” I said, laying my hand on hers, to detain her. “They will not thank you for the interruption.”

Her eye fell on my ring. “What a beautiful stone! Where did you get it, Sidney?”

“It was a New-Year’s present.”

“A present! Did you ever hear the old superstition, that the opal brings misfortune to its wearer?”

“I like the Oriental story best—‘A soul imprisoned in a pearl.’ But, I fear, henceforth I shall only think of your tradition.”

“I should be sorry to spoil your pleasure in wearing it.”

“It don’t matter,” I said, carelessly dropping the ring into my pocket. “It is not likely I shall wear it much longer.”

I was not sorry to find myself at home that evening. I wanted to be alone—to think over what I had seen. My confidence in Will Cameron was shaken, and, for the first time, I doubted him.

It is a bitter thing when we first learn to doubt any one we love. Love cannot exist without confidence; and when that departs, what is left? The rich fruit we sought to grasp turns to dust and ashes in our hands—we have made an idol, but to find it clay. Oh! easier far to weep over our friends, cold in death, than to live, knowing them unworthy of the wealth of affection we have lavished upon them.

He had walked home that evening with me. At parting, I had asked him to give me an hour the following morning, and, at the appointed time, he came.

He met me as affectionately as ever. "Sidney, you are pale this morning. What is my darling doing with such white cheeks?"

My heart thrilled at the loving tones. "Don't talk to me so, I entreat you! Will!" I said, standing before him, "are you in love with Meta Gray?"

"Why do you ask me that question, Sidney? I love you."

"Stop!" I said, almost angrily. "You have not answered my question."

His eyes fell under my searching look. "Are you jealous—" he began.

"Jealous! not I!"

"Then why need you bring Meta Gray between us? Sidney, are you losing confidence in me?" I turned away. He got up, walking up and down the room. Suddenly, he stopped before me and took my hands. "Sidney! I am not worthy of you! My admiration, my respect, wholly, fully, entirely—noble, true woman that you are, you possess! But," his eyes glittering, his cheeks flushed, "I adore Meta Gray! You are worth twenty such, and yet the mere touch of her hand is perfect happiness to me!"

I shrank from him. He sighed.

"Sidney, my fate is in your hands. I have felt like a wretch for weeks. But you still can save me—save my honor. You can make me, raise me, aid me. Be my wife, and I will do all in my power to make you forget this transient madness. I know I am asking a great deal," he went on, after a pause, in which I stood lean-

ing against the mantel-piece, my face buried in my hands. "But you love me, Sidney ; let that love plead my forgiveness. Do not let me feel that I have wrecked your happiness. Give yourself to me, and it will be the study of my life to make you forget this morning."

I raised my face, pale as his own was now.

"Don't ask me ; it is too late." We must part, Mr. Cameron ; we can still be friends."

"It may be best for you — not for me. Sidney, you will not thus dismiss me?"

I laid the ring, pledge of our betrothal, in his outstretched hand. He clasped my own in his.

"Good-bye," I said, firmly. "You will thank me for this some day."

I met his eyes, bent on me imploringly. My own were dim with tears, but I forced them back.

"We were not suited to each other. I do not blame you, Mr. Cameron ; you could not help your own nature. You will soon forget this. It is as well that the secret lay between ourselves."

"You will not deny me your friendship?"

"The less we see of each other for the present the better," I said. "It would be awkward for both. And now, Mr. Cameron, you must leave me."

He said no more, and withdrew. I listened to his departing footsteps, and then, throwing myself on the sofa, I burst into bitter tears.

The tears did me good. They were the first and the last I shed over my broken engagement—my engagement which had lasted two months. After all, it was "not so much a broken heart as a broken dream" I had to mourn.

"It is hard for you, I know, Sidney," my mother said to me. "But I never thought it would end otherwise. You will soon forget it."

Her words proved true. I was not the first who, won by similar tastes, had imagined, that because my lover and I thought alike on some topics, we were fitted for each other. It was very hard to bear; but the secrecy, to which I had so strongly objected at first, was my best aid. It spared me a great deal. Proud as I was, I could not endure pity. Sympathy, from a few, was welcome, not from all.

It was not long before I had regained my usual tranquillity. I had loved an ideal; and when the being I had invested with the many qualities of this ideal failed to come up to my standard, is it astonishing that love vanished? Strange to say, ere one month had passed, I was like another person. The trial, while it lasted, was a hard one, yet, when I could look dispassionately on the matter, I could only wonder at my own feelings.

“I am shamed thro’ all my nature to have loved so slight a thing.”

“It has done you good, Sidney,” my mother said one day to me. “You are softened down and more considerate.”

I was, in some things, happier. I could meet people now, feeling I had nothing to conceal, that no one could reproach me with deception. Yet it had made me suspicious. I had given full confidence, perfect trust; and because one had failed me, I doubted all. My girlhood was over.

I have touched but lightly on this episode in my life. Briefly though I have spoken of it, I would gladly, if I could, efface the recollection of those days from my memory.

CHAPTER XVI.

HUGH RALSTON'S ARRIVAL.

THERE are times in our lives when the days go on quietly, with nothing to mark them save their own round of duties, and we only note their flight by the changing seasons. To such periods, monotonous though they may be at the time, we afterwards look back, wondering that we ever murmured at their dulness. They seem like calms in the storms of life — green spots in the desert.

So, quietly, tranquilly, the days glided by. In the three months that followed the events I have faintly traced, I remember but little. One of my memories of those days is a conversation I held with Meta Gray.

She came, one March morning, looking fresh and fair as a spring flower. "Do you know Will Cameron has gone West?" she asked.

"I did not," I quietly replied. "What has taken him there?"

"Business for his father, Annie says. I could have told them a different story."

"Old Mr. Cameron has land in Missouri, I believe. Probably his son has gone there."

She looked at me mischievously — then nestled close to me, laying her cheek on my hand, with the grace of a kitten, to which I could not help mentally comparing her. "Then you knew he was gone?"

"This is the first I had heard of it. I have not seen the gentleman in question for weeks."

"And you two used to be intimate. Sidney," her eyes fixed on mine, "I once thought he liked you."

I met her look steadily, though I felt my heart beat. "We were very good friends."

"I know that. But for the last month he has nearly lived at uncle's."

"Am I to congratulate you, Meta?" and my voice sounded harsh to my own ears. The wounded nerve still quivered.

"On my rejection of Will Cameron?—yes."

"You have refused him, then?"

"It was such fun, Sidney." She laid her hand on my shoulder, bright gleams of color in her fair cheeks, her strange eyes flashing. "You should have seen him—kneeling, as he did, at my feet, imploring me to listen to him. He will make a good lawyer if he is as earnest in pleading at the bar as he was with me." She laughed, bitterly.

"Meta! I thought you liked him!"

"So he thought, and so he said. As if, for a few smiles, a few words of flattery on my part, I was to pay the penalty of tying myself down for life."

"Have you no heart?" I asked.

"Oh, yes! somewhere in my composition, there's something whose pulsations send the blood to perform its usual functions, as anatomists say; but for anything further—Now, don't look so sober, Sidney; I've done nothing wrong."

"I will not listen to you any longer, Meta. First, you should have kept Mr. Cameron's secret."

"I am keeping it," she interrupted. "It is safe with

you. Sidney, I cannot live without excitement, and if I did not try my power on some one I should die."

"What will you do about Annie Cameron?"

"Nothing. Her brother can surely keep his own counsel, and I am fully able to take care of myself."

"Do you know what you remind me of?" I said. "The old German fable of the Loreley."

"What is that?"

"Did you never hear it? A beautiful female, who, by her charms, and sweet singing, lured men to destruction."

"Like the sirens of mythology?"

"Only you live in the nineteenth century, and they flourished in olden times."

She laughed. "It is well you are a woman, Sidney. I might else try my powers of fascination on you."

The mail, two or three days later, brought me a hurried note — only a few lines, with neither date nor signature:

"Ere you receive this, you will have heard of my departure from Fairfield. In this disappointment — for Meta Gray has refused me — I crave your sympathy. Sidney, can you ever forgive me my madness? I have awakened from my brief intoxication to learn that, while I sought to gain a glittering gaud, which turned to nothingness in my grasp, I lost a pearl, richer than all its tribe. In time, may I return to you, when you have forgotten and forgiven?"

"It is too late!" I said to myself, as I dropped this strange missive into the flames. I gave it no answer.

A few days later, Meta came to bid me good-bye. She was to be absent a few weeks, visiting a school friend. And the day she left, Hugh Ralston came.

I had stopped at Mrs. Merton's that afternoon, know-

ing she was alone. The time had slipped quickly by ; for we sat talking until the rapidly lengthening shadows warned me to depart. It was nearly sundown, and, not caring to be alone in the streets after dusk, I hurried home.

My mother was not in her usual sitting-room when I reached the house. I did not seek her, but went, instead, to the parlor, where, seating myself at the piano, I soon forgot everything except my music.

Our parlor was a cheerful, pleasant room, which had been added to the house by my father. It was not large, nor was it elegantly furnished, like some apartments in which comfort is sacrificed to ostentation and display. There was a bay-window at one end, where, during the winter, I kept a stand of flourishing plants, whose fresh verdure and gay flowers enlivened the room. The walls were papered in oak, bordered with crimson ; a plain carpet of corresponding colors covered the floor ; a few choice engravings hung on the walls ; chairs, made for use, not for show, covered with the same bright-colored rep ; my piano, a few light tables, and a lounge matching the chairs, were the only articles of furniture the room contained. Over the grate — for my father loved to see the cheerful blaze of the sea-coal — was a plain mantel, supporting a mirror in a frame of black walnut.

A cosy little room, opening from this home-like parlor, was the place where we usually sat through the day. But our evenings were all spent in our parlor. It was not kept only for company. My father used to say he did not believe in keeping the best for strangers.

I played on and on — for, in spite of the time given to my pupils, I devoted a certain part of each day to my own music — for nearly an hour. Rising, then, to change my

book, I heard voices in the adjoining room, and, closing the instrument, I went to the door. My mother sat there, talking to a gentleman, whom I immediately guessed to be our new inmate. I looked at him with a considerable degree of curiosity; but I had only time for a hurried glance, for my mother looked up and saw me.

“My daughter Sidney, Dr. Ralston.”

He rose to acknowledge the introduction. I was about to greet him with a formal bow, but he held out his hand.

“I am glad to meet Miss Elliott.”

Simple words, such as any one might have used, but heartily said. We shook hands — mine lay for a moment in his, broad, firm, and strong, giving a cordial grasp; not one of those mere touches I so despise, given for form’s sake.

He placed a chair for me, then recommenced his conversation with my mother. Then I had time to examine him.

He was tall, broad-shouldered — that I had seen when he rose at my entrance. I liked his face, though it could not, strictly, be called handsome. The broad, open brow betokened intellect; the dark, flashing eyes looked you, unshrinkingly, full in the face; the well-closed mouth was shaded by a heavy mustache, matching in color the closely-cut chestnut hair; the firm, square chin, smoothly shaven, told of decision — perhaps obstinacy. One hand, large, white, and well-shaped — a good hand for a surgeon, I had thought, as I felt its firm grasp — lay carelessly on his knee, even in rest betokening, as did his whole frame, strength and power; the other supported his head.

“I like his looks,” was my mental comment. “I wonder what he will prove on future acquaintance!”

‘What conclusion have you come to, after all, Miss

Elliott," said the deep, firm tones. "I hope 'tis a favorable one."

I looked down, about to make some disclaimer, but the merry look in those dark eyes made me change my reply. "How did you know I was forming one?"

"Not very hard, when you have been watching me for the last half-hour. Are you satisfied with your inspection, or shall I give you further opportunity?"

"A cat may look at a king," was my laughing reply.

"Aye—but what did pussy see when she went to London to look at majesty? Only a mouse, for she was true to her own nature."

"Is Mother Goose in your medical library?" I asked. "Because, if not, I can provide you with a copy."

"Thank you," with a quizzical look. "I have no doubt I should be benefited by its perusal. Do you recommend it?"

"I would not presume to offer an opinion, Dr. Ralston."

"I am very harmless, Miss Elliott. You need not be afraid of me."

Harmless! I thought otherwise, as I looked at his mischievous eyes.

"Well, why don't you speak? I don't intend we shall be strangers, Miss Elliott. Your mother has been very kind in admitting me to her house, and I intend to show my appreciation of her kindness by making friends with her daughter."

"Provided, of course, her daughter consents," I said. "I don't believe in taking things for granted."

"Now please don't annihilate me altogether! You can't make me quarrel with you, young lady."

"I wish you would sit down and keep quiet," I said;

for he had risen from his chair, and was standing in front of me, one hand smoothing his moustache. "There is the evening paper ; amuse yourself over that."

"I had rather talk to you." But he sat down obediently, with the offered paper. I went to the book-case, and selected a volume from one of its shelves.

"This paper is very stupid," he remarked, laying it aside. I was prepared for this, and I quietly laid "Mother Goose" before him. His eyes twinkled as he thanked me for my politeness.

"I give it to you," I said, "on the same principle on which we give toys to children—to keep them quiet."

"I may, at least, talk to you, Mrs. Elliott. Your daughter is not socially inclined this evening."

He talked to my mother for some time. I watched him, as I thought, unperceived ; but I was mistaken.

"If you will not talk to me, you shall not look at me," he said, as he dextrously built up a screen of books on the table between us. "Now, as I do not suppose you are a clairvoyant, you cannot see me."

"Were you conscious of my gaze?" I asked, from behind my screen.

"I think we are all conscious of a fixed look," he said. "Did you never feel tempted, in church particularly, to look in a certain direction, and, on turning round, find some one's eyes bent upon you?"

"No one ever took that trouble with me," I said, laughing.

"Miss Elliott, I never pay compliments. That I wish you to understand thoroughly at once."

"You cannot dislike them more than I do," I said, curtly ; for I felt I had the worst of it. He laughed, and quietly demolished the barrier between us.

“Why did you do that? I was very well satisfied to have it remain.”

We were summoned at that moment to supper. It was considerably later than usual when we sat down, and after tea we did not linger long around the fire.

“With your permission, Mrs. Elliott,” Dr. Ralston said, “I will smoke a cigar on the porch;” and, as I bade him good night, “I foresee that you and I will be very good friends.”

“How do you like him?” my mother said to me.

“He is very different from what I expected. I thought he was very young, mother, and he is a man of thirty.”

“He is just twenty-eight. I like him, Sidney. I don’t think we need regret admitting him to our home.”

I found him, the next morning, when I came down stairs, in the sitting-room. He placed a chair for me. I had already noticed his great attention to all little matters of etiquette.

“I am an early riser,” he said, in reply to my expressed astonishment at finding him down so soon. “It is a pity to lose so many of our hours in sleep.”

“I am not an early riser from choice. My time is money, and I cannot afford to waste it,” I replied.

“I hope I will soon have none to waste. I want to be kept busy. You have a beautiful town here, Miss Elliott. I hope there is a niche in it for me to fill.”

“Fairfield is a pretty place,” I said; “but you will find it very dull, Dr. Ralston. Even I, who am accustomed to it, often weary of its monotony.”

“If I can only get plenty of work, I shall not care for the dulness. I am not fond of society; and when I do want that, I will call on you.”

“Shall I introduce you to my friends?”

“What! take me around to be inspected by the young ladies of Fairfield? I thought the inspection last night, by a certain pair of black eyes, was enough, and you threaten me with more! I thank you for your kindness, Miss Elliott.”

“I will do it in self-defence,” I retorted. “You will drive me crazy in a week.”

“I should deeply regret such a misfortune. What are you going to do with your morning?”

“I shall be out this morning,” I said, coolly.

“I beg your pardon. I had no business to ask the question. I will be more generous, and tell you I expect to spend my morning in study.”

“Easier than teaching.”

“I had forgotten. Do you know your mother has given me the privilege of using your father’s library?”

“You are right in calling it a privilege,” I said, surprised. “She prizes those books very highly, and no one ever touches them now, save herself.”

“I appreciate her kindness most fully. Be assured I shall not abuse it.” He was serious enough now. “Do you know you remind me of your father, Miss Sidney? He had a higher opinion of me than I deserved, and I believe I owe your mother’s kindness to his partiality. I cannot hope to take his place in Fairfield; but I may, at least, follow in his footsteps.”

Hugh Ralston was soon at home with us. My mother seemed brighter for his presence, and he showed her a tender, gentle deference that I liked to see. He was a thorough gentleman, polite to all. He and my mother were, before long, devoted friends. “Hugh” she called him, at his own request; it reminded him, he said, of his own mother, dead years ago.

“What little good there is in me, Mrs. Elliott,” I heard him say one day, “I owe wholly to my mother. As a boy, the fear of grieving her, of hearing her sole reproach, ‘Was it right, Hugh?’ kept me from many a boyish folly, from many a thoughtless deed; and even now, man as I am, her influence follows me. ‘She, being dead, yet speaketh;’ for I remember her pure, holy life, her prayers, her hopes for her wilful boy; and while that sweet memory lingers with me, I cannot go wholly astray.”

He paused. My mother made no reply. She knew that silence is sometimes more expressive of true sympathy than any words we can use. He went on:

“She was a good, true woman. And to think this is all I have left of her!”

He took from the inner pocket of his coat a small miniature, which he opened, looking at it with a moisture in his eyes not unbecoming his manhood.

“It is but a faint shadow of her.” He laid the picture in my mother’s hand. I saw it, months later.

It represented a pale, fair woman, with sweet, sad eyes; fair hair, folded back from a placid brow, on which you read peace; a calm mouth, with the same firm expression her son’s wore.

“It is a good, true face,” my mother said; “delicate, refined, yet resolute. Hugh, I do not wonder you revered her; for on her brow rests the beatitude: ‘Blessed are the pure in heart.’”

He closed the miniature reverently.

“I have sometimes thought, Mrs. Elliott, that when I marry—as I hope to, some day; I think of it at times—”

“As it is but right you should.”

“I think, remembering her, my mother” — how reverently he said that word — “I think, remembering her, I would wish my wife to be like her. A fair-haired, blue-eyed girl, gentle, good, and womanly. Yet, for *her* sake, I reverence all womanhood.”

They had forgotten my presence. So I, feeling I had no right to listen to this quiet talk, slipped noiselessly from the room; and they never missed me, nor knew I had been present.

CHAPTER XVII.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS.

IT was not long before Hugh Ralston's hands were full. A lucky chance — no, I will not say chance ; for there is no such thing in this world — brought him into notice ; and our people in Fairfield, though slow to receive new-comers, and tardy in acknowledging their merit, soon gave him their confidence. There had been an accident on the railroad — one of those fearful crashes in which there is “nobody to blame :” only a screw loose, a slight flaw in a piece of iron, unseen, unsuspected ; and some day it yields, and souls, unprepared, are hurried into eternity.

There was such an accident near town : some lives lost, not many, yet each one in itself most precious — each one the light and joy of some household, where nevermore they might listen for the coming footstep, or again see the loved form ; some losing arm or leg, thankful, though halt and maimed, to escape with life ; one or two so fearfully injured that death were almost preferable to a life of suffering ; and, as I said before, “nobody to blame.”

To this accident Hugh Ralston owed his first case. A lucky chance, did I say ? It was to his treatment of one of the sufferers that I alluded.

He was a poor man, one of the brakesmen on the road — a position full of danger, and most responsible.

He was severely injured, chiefly about the head and right arm, the latter crushed and lacerated. The physicians prepared to amputate it.

"Don't!" he said, feebly. "I can bear the pain, but save my arm. My poor wife and children — what would they do without my work?"

Dr. Ralston stepped forward. "Permit me," he said, in his cool manner. "I think" — after a rapid examination — "the arm can be saved."

"Are you willing to take the responsibility?" one of the doctors present asked. He was an elderly man, of high repute in his profession.

Ralston bowed. "I should like to take the case. With all due deference to superior experience, I think time will show that I am right."

"It will be a good advertisement for you, if you succeed," another said to him. "But if you fail — Take my advice, Ralston. The man's life, at any rate, can be saved."

"I can, at least, try. His arm is nearly as valuable to him as his life. I will take the responsibility on my own shoulders."

There were a good many comments made on the obstinacy of the young physician; but the event proved he was right. He cured his patient; and, from the day that was known, he was sought after, and he soon had no reason to complain of lack of occupation.

"Who is this Dr. Ralston I hear so much about?" Annie Cameron asked me, one Saturday evening at our usual choir-meeting. "Do you know anything about him?"

"I ought to," I replied, "as he boards with us; "but I really can tell you very little, except that he is an old

student of my father's, and that my mother thinks very highly of him."

"Did he not come to church with her last Sunday?" Kate Strong asked. "A tall, dark-haired man, with a very firm mouth and chin."

"The very same," I replied.

"Why don't you bring him here?" was the next question.

"Why? I don't even know that he can sing. Perhaps, if I tell him the young ladies want to see him, it might be sufficient attraction; but he is, in my opinion, no ladies' man."

"Did you know Meta had come home?" Annie asked.

"Who is taking my name in vain?" said the well-known voice, flute-like as ever. "Sidney, Kate, Annie—I am glad to see you all again!"

There were general exclamations of pleasure.

"I knew I should find you all here; so I said nothing to Aunt Mary, but just ran around. What's the news in Fairfield?—or is it still going on in the old routine?"

"There is nothing new," Annie said, laughing. "Will talks of coming home next month; and there's an addition to the medical force of the city."

"A new doctor! We needed him in this healthy place."

"He is doing very well," I said. "You ought to know him, Meta."

"I don't like young doctors. They are generally extremely disagreeable."

"This one is handsome," Kate laughed. "I liked Dr. Ralston's appearance."

Meta's whole expression changed. Her bright smile was gone, and her lips, firmly drawn together, were perfectly colorless. She caught my eye.

"Ralston, did you say? Hugh Ralston—I have heard the name."

"It is not a very common one," I said.

"I beg your pardon. There are Ralstons in Philadelphia."

"This one is from Illinois," I answered.

"Is he?" evidently relieved. "I do not know him."

I had completely forgotten this conversation, when a trifle, a day or so later, recalled it to me. I was walking with Meta, when Hugh Ralston met me. He stopped.

"I shall not be home for tea this evening, Miss Sidney. Will you tell your mother?"

He saw Meta at that moment, and raised his hat. To my great amazement, she offered her hand.

"I am glad to see you, Dr. Ralston. This is an unexpected pleasure."

He bowed coolly.

"I certainly did not expect to meet Miss Gray in Fairfield." His tone was freezingly polite. Meta smiled.

"It is pleasant to meet old acquaintances."

"Sometimes—yes." And, with another bow, he passed on. I turned to Meta.

"I thought you did not know him. Where in the world did you two ever meet?"

"How was I to know which Hugh Ralston this was?" pettishly. "I met him in Philadelphia, attending lectures. He has not improved since then."

"It is strange he has never mentioned you," I persisted. "Were you friends?"

"Friends—yes. Are you a judge of lace, Sidney? I bought some a few days since."

She was unwilling, I saw, to speak of Hugh Ralston. My curiosity, I confess, was excited on the subject; but

I could not press her, as she was evidently unwilling to discuss it with me.

Dr. Ralston came home early that evening. Something, I don't know what, kept me from questioning him. He was very restless. I bent over my book, trying to read, while he paced up and down the room. At last he stopped, and, drawing a chair up, he sat down opposite to me, his restless hand fretting the glossy brown of his moustache.

"Put down your book, please, Miss Sidney. I want to talk to you."

"Well!" my fingers between the pages of the volume.

"I have been expecting to be questioned all the evening. Proceed, won't you?"

"I have no questions to ask," I said, carelessly. "I am not your 'father confessor.'"

"Have you no curiosity?" watching me. "You have not even asked me where I met your friend."

I smiled. "Meta told me—in Philadelphia."

"Then you knew we were old acquaintances."

"I did not, till this afternoon, know you had ever met. All I know, I have told you." And I re-opened my book.

"She has, at least, some little discretion," he muttered almost inaudibly. "What are you reading, Miss Sidney?" in his usual tone, and with his old manner.

I mentioned the name. It was "The Mill on the Floss"—that book with its strange motto: "The mills of the gods grind slowly."

"I have read it. How do you like it?"

"I don't like it at all," I said. "It is well written, but I do not admire Maggie Tulliver."

"It is like all women's books," sarcastically. "Not one of the sex ever could write."

"I think Mrs. Browning and Charlotte Bronte are sufficient refutation to that assertion."

"Ay—but they were exceptional cases. To tell you the truth, Miss Sidney, I don't approve of female authorship. You cannot write without making yourself public property, without subjecting yourself to every one's criticism, giving yourself to the world. For every one who writes unveils their own nature, and it seems to me inconsistent with true womanly delicacy to be willing so to cast aside all reserve."

"You are prejudiced," I said, smiling. "I fear you have but a poor opinion of our sex."

"You mistake me, Miss Sidney. I have a most exalted opinion of women. Of course, there are some who fall far short of what they ought to be, but I do your sex full justice. What would earth be without you? what would our homes be without your softening, refining influences? That is your sphere; ours is action."

"I do not agree with you," I said, quietly. "If we have talents, why should we not use them? I do not think that contact with the world does us harm: and as for those who have not woman's usual occupations, the care of a house and children; would you have them sit with their hands folded, doing nothing, leading a miserable, stagnating existence?"

My mother spoke. "Sidney is right, Hugh. I cannot see how a woman's earning her own bread, using the powers with which she is gifted, at all detracts from her womanliness."

"How is it with myself?" I rather mischievously asked. "For a year past, Dr. Ralston, I have earned my own living by my musical abilities. It has done me no harm."

He smiled. "We were discussing female authorship, Miss Sidney."

“Ay—but even there! If we can use the pen, why forbid it to us? You yield us the palm in epistolary composition: why debar us from other literary pursuits?”

“I can answer you by appealing to all feminine compositions. No woman ever wrote without making all her characters shadows of her own self. She writes, not from what she sees, but from her own feelings. Take, for instance, the two writers you named to me. *Jane Eyre* is Charlotte Bronte herself, with her own thoughts, hopes, and feelings; and as for Mrs. Browning, what man would ever, as she has done in her ‘*De Profundis*,’ make the whole world the confidant of his sorrows?”

“I fear there is no convincing you.”

“Try it yourself, Miss Sidney. I doubt not but that you could, if you chose, write a novel. But don’t undertake that; try a short story, and if, before its completion, you do not find that all your characters are either the reflections of yourself, their feelings your own, their words yours; or else that they are faint shadows of your acquaintances, why, I will own myself in the wrong.”

“I have neither talent nor inclination that way,” I said, in reply. “I never, at school, could write a respectable composition.”

“The power may be latent.”

“I have no desire to try. Still, I hold to my position. Wait, Dr. Ralston; I shall yet see you the husband of an authoress, and proud of your wife’s talents.”

“I hope,” seriously, “your prediction may fail in its fulfilment. My wife must belong to me, not to the whole world. I would not share a divided heart.”

“Like Alexander, you would rule—yet you would rule—alone!” I misquoted playfully. “We will see, Dr. Ralston.”

He answered, in the same tone: "You are right. I dislike inky fingers, and I don't want 'copy' and 'proof' to monopolize my wife."

"I should like to see her," I said.

"I hope you will, some day."

"Mother," I said, a few moments later, "Will Cameron is coming home next month." I was surprised to find how coolly I could speak on the subject.

"Then your choir will be complete again."

No further remarks were made on that topic. I resumed my book, my mother took up her knitting, and I thought I would now be permitted to read in quiet. I was mistaken.

"Miss Sidney! are you a strong-minded female?"

"What a question, Dr. Ralston!"

"I wish you would call me Hugh, as your mother does," shaking himself in a way that reminded me somehow of a great Newfoundland dog; "surely it is more friendly than that formal 'Dr. Ralston!'"

"What has that to do with my being strong-minded?"

"Nothing! only please lay aside that book, and make yourself agreeable."

"You are a perfect torment," I said, laying aside the offending volume. "What do you want?"

"A game of chess, if you can play. I found men and board carefully laid away this morning, and immediately resolved to bring them out."

So our games of chess began. After that, nearly every evening found us engaged in the friendly strife. "It is a wonder," I said to him one evening, after a long-contested game ending in a draw, in reply to some compliment on my skill: "It is a wonder you acknowledge I know a little of the game. I never yet played with any

gentleman who was willing to attribute his defeat to my skill ; it was always owing to some mistake, some misplay on his part."

"I don't think we like to see women good chess-players. Chess is such a game of strategy—of conspiracies, that one scarcely likes to see a lady proficient in such qualities. I don't look on it in that way."

"I think chess much over-rated," I said, in reply. "It is a mere matter of memory; every move brings its corresponding reply."

"It is the only thing we don't quarrel over," he said, smiling. "We, unfortunately, seldom agree."

"I hope you will agree with me on one subject," I said, with a smile. "We are invited to the Camerons' to-morrow evening, and I am requested to bring you."

"So I must sacrifice myself for the good of society! I am at your service, Miss Sidney, for to-morrow evening. But remember, you must look your bonniest."

"What are you doing with Scotch words?" I questioned. "Who scolded the other day because I used some French expression?"

"In the first place, Miss Sidney, I am half Scotch. My mother was a Scotswoman, native-born; else where do you think I got my rough name, Hugh, or, as they spell it, Hew? So I have a right to use my own mother's tongue. In the second place, there are enough words in the English language, without our seeking their equivalents in French. It is a mere affectation, after all. And if you cannot find an English word which expresses your meaning, why, coin one."

"Thank you for the advice. I have no desire to go down to posterity as an improver (?) of my mother-tongue."

He laughed. "There are two things I do hate. One is this habit some young ladies have of interlarding their conversation with foreign words, French or Italian. Even books, now-a-days, are not free from it. You cannot take one up, without finding its pages profusely besprinkled with phrases which might be much better expressed in English."

"But French is so generally understood," I objected.

“So, well and good! Knowledge is useful, yet we do not always want to parade it.”

"And your second aversion?"

“Need you ask? only slang. Miss Sidney, the American people are going ahead rapidly enough in the ‘fast’ line, to use one of the expressions myself, without our young ladies lending a helping hand.”

“You are very particular,” I said, somewhat amused. “I will answer you in the words of some verses I read not many days since:

“ ‘Tis masculine to doctor, lecture, quibble;
Must women be content to work or scribble?

'At best, all life contains its share of trial —

'Neath freedom's sunshine men can brave the gloom!

Our path, perforce, is strewn with self-denial;

Can we gaze patiently upon our doom?

To serve, to nurse, to tutor, and for all this

To get, sometimes, a patronizing kiss.

‘Then let us still be pure and good, and trusting—

No harm to wish us just a trifle wiser;

A woman not a woman is disgusting,

But independence don't make me despise her.

‘If true strength lies in a calm nothingness,

Then idiots are all mighty men, I guess.'"

“Modern aspirations,” he laughed. “Your verses have nothing to do with French or slang.”

“I know that! I was thinking of our discussion, some few evenings since, about women using their talents.”

“I give up! There is no use arguing with you, Miss Sidney. I am silenced.”

“But ‘not convinced,’ I fear.”

““And, right or wrong, to have the latest word,””

was the parting quotation he sent after me, as I ran up stairs.

Looking over the pages I have written, I see but little incident there. Yet, so far as they go, they form a true record of my life. After all, how much incident is there in any human existence? We can sum them up briefly: we live, love, and suffer. Our lives, in a great measure, are spent alone. There is a veiled chamber in every heart, in which sits the soul, where no one enters, which we would not open to any gaze save our own. Our history is but a record of our own feelings. Trifles shape our lives; trifles, in appearance, change the whole current of our existence. And this, that I write, as Montaigne says, “is myself, my very being.” What is our life, our outward life, save the reflection of our inner self? And, unless “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” be spoken, the pen had best be laid aside.

In the days of which I am now writing my chief memories are of my conversations with Hugh Ralston. Our friendly discussions kept my mind on the alert. I could not but contrast him with Will Cameron. My fancy for him was over—I now viewed that in its proper light. Measuring him by a higher standard, of which he fell far short, I wondered at my own infatuation, fascination,

for such it was. / A young girl's first fancy seldom lasts: well that it is so! The old truism — a woman never marries her first love — has more meaning in it than we think for. Womanhood requires more than girlhood; what pleases eighteen displeases twenty-eight. Better a moment's pang than a life-long sorrow.

I was not in love with Hugh Ralston. That was a thought which never crossed my mind. We were very good friends, though he was far more intimate with my mother than with me. She treated him as she would have done a son, had her own been spared; and he gave her a respectful deference and confidence that, loving her as I did, was most gratifying to me.

“He is like what your father was as a young man,” she said to me one day, and I knew she could give him no higher praise. “I am glad to see he is stepping, by degrees, into your father's practice.”

My dear mother! I believe she was very happy in those days! How was it with me? I confess, I was getting tired of my quiet life. I had no reason to complain — I had nothing to do — but I wanted excitement.

The days were coming, nay, they were already begun, when I was to learn that this very tranquillity was true happiness. My bark had, hitherto, been sailing in calm waters; it was to pass over stormy seas, through difficult channels, before it would rest again in a safe haven.

But I am anticipating. It is well the future is mercifully hidden from our ken. Else, how would we bear the many trials of our lot? If to their endurance were added their anticipation, it would be too much for frail human nature to support.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PAPER WALLS.

I WAS very proud of my escort as, leaning on his arm, I entered Mrs. Cameron's crowded parlors. It was the first large party I had ever attended, and was much larger than I had anticipated. I could scarcely, at first, distinguish who were present. After saluting our hostess, who stood resplendent in purple velvet, Dr. Ralston whispered to me :

"I shall have to depend on you to-night. This is my first introduction to Fairfield society."

"It is my first large party," I said, in the same tone.

"Dr. Ralston, my daughter, Miss Cameron."

So I was left to the tender mercies of a crowd of young ladies, who immediately surrounded me.

"You'll introduce him, won't you, Sidney?"—"Don't forget me"—"He's just splendid"—and so on.

"I'll do what I can," I said to all. And, in the course of the evening, I succeeded in gratifying nearly all the anxious damsels.

The crowd brought me, at last, near Meta Gray. I had scarcely seen her of late, and I asked her why she had been so unsocial.

She laughed. "I might ask you the same question, Sidney. You ought to be careful how you throw stones."

"Have you been sick, Meta?" for I noticed she was unusually pale.

"No, only worried."

"You worried! I wish I had as little to trouble me as you have!"

"Don't ask me," impatiently. "Is Hugh Ralston here to-night?"

"He is," I replied. I was about to add the information that he had accompanied me, when Mr. Perkins came up.

"Miss Gray, Miss Elliott, good evening. Are we not to have some music to-night?"

"We may oblige you later, Mr. Perkins," Meta smiled.

"I do love music!" clearing his throat most unmusic-ally. "I would give anything if I could play and sing."

"You should have gone to a German school, where *all* are taught music," I said. "If one has any taste that way, it is a pity not to cultivate it."

"I wish I could sing as well as Cameron does," he went on. "Miss Gray, I had a miserable drive up to-day."

"I wonder you take it so often," she replied.

"I get very tired of the country. It does well enough during the day, but the evenings are awfully dull. And this mild weather makes the roads very bad, 'specially the pikes! my wheels sometimes sunk two feet in the mud!"

"Pursuit of pleasure under difficulties!" I said.

"It was very difficult for the horses. They know they've got to go when I'm behind them."

"Nothing like a firm hand for them," Meta said, carelessly.

"Can you give me the town-time, Miss Gray? Really, I forget, sometimes, to set my watch."

"I don't carry mine to parties, Mr. Perkins."

Some one came up to ask her to sing. She was always

obliging about this, as we generally are, liking to do anything we know we do well, and she smilingly assented. We had been standing near the piano.

I shall not attempt again to describe her singing. To say that it silenced even Mr. Perkins is sufficient praise. But the song over, his flow of talk, very small talk, recommenced. It is not worth recording; an occasional 'yes' or 'no' was all that was necessary. His range was limited, himself, his horses, his farming, being his usual topics.

Dr. Ralston had approached the piano to hear Meta's song, and, after it was over, I was surprised to see him in apparently friendly conversation with her. They stood directly behind me, so that, if I had chosen, I could have heard every word. I paid no attention, however, till I heard my own name mentioned, as Meta slightly changed her position, so that I could see her face. It was not very honorable, I know; but, under cover of Lewis Perkins' platitudes, I confess my curiosity proved too strong for me.

"So you are boarding with the Elliotts!"

"Yes," very curtly.

"How do you like it?"

"I have a very high regard for Mrs. Elliott."

"You will prove it, ere long, I presume, by making love to her daughter."

He made no reply. She looked at me, a long, furtive glance. I stood, to all appearance unconscious. This was a new phase in Meta's character.

"Well, is my supposition correct?"

I listened anxiously for the reply. It came:

"I thought you and Miss Elliott were friends."

"Friends? Yes, *devoted* friends. That is, so long as she is useful to me. You see, I am very plain with you."

His tone was very scornful. "You have need to be."

"Aye, and I tell you plainly that you and Sidney are too intimate. We are *friends*, you know."

"I know what that means from you."

"Pah! Do you suppose I care for her? She is a good foil for me, and I find her accommodatigly useful. You need not fear for her, Hugh Ralston."

"Meta Gray! are you a woman?"

She laughed—a low, ringing, musical laugh. "I am not a spirit, most assuredly. If you compare me with Sidney, I am not like her, I know."

"I know your old vanity."

"What! because I know I am beautiful! When even you acknowledge my power in that aspect!"

"Aye! the sight of a woman's fair looks sometimes does make one forget her errors."

"Well—would you have me pretend to ignore what my mirror tells me every day? Stop, Hugh! You say Sidney is my friend. Shall I tell you why? Don't you suppose I know the power of contrast—how my fair hair, gray eyes, and rosy cheeks show off to advantage by her? Why don't you win her heart, Hugh? She is so unsophisticated, 'twould be no hard thing." She paused.

"Miss Elliott is far above you, Meta."

"Ah! really! I warn you, Hugh Ralston. You may be her sworn knight, but let her once dare to cross my path—"

"Stop!" he said, in those low, firm tones. "Sidney Elliott is nothing to me—she has probably never wasted a thought on me. I have borne your insinuations long enough, Meta. Had I known you were here, I never would have come to Fairfield; as it is, I tell you solemnly that if you dare harm Sidney Elliott, I will warn her

against you. The whole past, no matter what it costs me, I will reveal to her. You know how much reason you have to dread it."

"Would you tell her your share in those days?" she asked, bitterly. "You, who had not even my poor excuse!"

"I would!" firmly. "And you know I can keep my word."

I had heard enough. Through the whole conversation I had kept up a desultory kind of talk with my companion. It was not honorable in me, I know, to have listened; and now, that it was all over, I would have given worlds to recall those few minutes.

"Mr. Perkins," I said at last, "can we not find another seat?"

"This draft is too much for you, Miss Elliott. You are fairly shivering."

I was glad to have this excuse to change my position. I sat talking to Kate Strong—Mr. Perkins having long since deserted me to join Annie—when Dr. Ralston came up to us.

"I am completely talked out, Miss Sidney. How in the world do you young ladies find so many topics?"

"We picked up seven baskets out of the nine dropped into Eden, Dr. Ralston," Kate playfully remarked. "You have heard that old story, I suppose, of the baskets of gossip?"

He smiled. "They could not have fallen into better hands."

"You seemed to have plenty to say to Meta Gray," Kate went on. "Both parties seemed mutually interested. How is it, Dr. Ralston—have you, too, yielded to her charm?"

"Miss Gray and I are old acquaintances. Such generally have enough to talk about."

"She is very lovely." He bowed. "And very popular here."

"Miss Sidney, you look tired. Can I get anything for you?"

"I don't wonder she is tired," Kate said, before I could reply. "Poor child, she has had to talk to Lewis Perkins for the longest time! enough to tire any one!"

"Is he not entertaining?"

"Oh! decidedly so. He told me, not long since, he had been reading a most interesting novel. It was called 'David Copperfield'—he supposed I was familiar with it—one of Scott's."

Even Dr. Ralston joined in the laugh which followed.

"How can you, Kate!" I exclaimed, as soon as I regained my voice. "It is a wonder he could talk of anything but horses!"

"That, and his industry! I used to believe in that, till I paid a visit in the neighborhood. He talked so much about his constant occupation, that I really thought he must be invaluable. It resolved itself into his sitting on the fence, a cigar in his mouth, watching his father's workmen."

"I am afraid you are sarcastic, Miss Strong."

"No," I said, lightly. "Kate is trying to conceal her jealousy of Annie Cameron."

"Sidney, how dare you!" shaking her fan at me. "Annie is welcome to her conquest. I would not have him as a gift."

"'Sour grapes hang high!'" was my reply to this.

"I hate proverbs, Sidney. Look there."

It was really to be an evening of surprises to me. I

looked in the direction she indicated, and there stood — Will Cameron. He soon saw me. He hesitated for a moment; then, as I bowed, came forward to speak to me.

It was rather embarrassing for both of us; it being our first meeting since our last momentous interview. He was looking well; his Western trip had burnt him brown as a berry; but there were lines on his forehead I had never seen there before.

“I did not expect to meet so many friends here to-night,” he said, as, after acknowledging his introduction to Dr. Ralston, a few courteous remarks had passed between the two young men. “I am home two weeks earlier than I expected.”

He did not linger long near our trio. He was evidently uncomfortable in my presence. I pitied him: although I was not free from a certain degree of consciousness, I was the more self-possessed of the two. I watched him, unnoticed. I wanted to see how he and Meta Gray would meet. To all appearance, they were as friendly as ever. I saw, however, that while she tried, in every way, her old fascinations upon him, they had, in a great degree, lost their power.

“Do you enjoy these scenes, Miss Sidney?” Dr. Ralston suddenly asked me, as some one called Kate away. “You are so lost in thought that you have completely forgotten your position.”

“I cannot say I do,” I replied. “Just as you spoke, I was wondering what would be the effect, if this were suddenly changed to the Palace of Truth.”

He bit his lip. “Not many of us could stand the test.”

“Or would we, if we could? Our skeleton, of which they say there is one in each household, is best concealed.”

“Yet they all look happy.”

It was, indeed, a gay scene. Kate was at the piano, her willing fingers flashing over the keys, in the merry notes of a polka. The floor was filled with dancers, the girls' light, airy robes contrasting well with the sober habiliments of the gentlemen. Meta, her fair face aglow with the exercise, her bright hair, like threads of gold, falling in graceful curls, her light draperies looped with scarlet, her favorite color, passed us at that moment. She shook her bouquet playfully at my companion, with a lovely smile.

“I am tired,” she said to her partner, as the next few minutes brought her near us again. “Sidney, may I share your seat?”

I made room for her on the low ottoman which I occupied. I cannot say I was pleased to see her, nor did I make any great effort at conversation.

“You are very silent to-night,” she said, at last. “Why have you not been dancing?”

“I am not fond of the exercise.”

“One would think you forty years old, Sidney, instead of twenty. You are uncommonly sober this evening. What has Dr. Ralston been saying to you?”

“Trying to make myself agreeable,” he said, lightly.

“I thought you two were having a nice, cosy time,” glancing from one to the other of us, through her half-closed eyelids. “I am fairly sick of the nonsense I have heard talked to-night; one can weary of sweets.”

“You never got many from me,” I said, yielding, as so often I had done before, to her fascinating manner.

“I always prized you for your sincerity,” gayly. “She is one of the few people, Dr. Ralston, who have the courage to scold me.”

“You were always very well able to take care of yourself. Miss Elliott, do you know it is getting late? Some of the party have already gone home.”

“I shall not be sorry to follow their example,” I said, rising. “Good night, Meta.”

“I shall see you to-morrow, Sidney. Take good care of her, doctor.”

I was only too glad to find myself once more in my quiet room. It had been a most uncomfortable evening to me. Meta was more of a puzzle to me than ever. She and Dr. Ralston, I thought, seemed afraid of each other. There was evidently some secret between them; what, I could not divine. I thought over the conversation I had heard between them, till my head fairly ached. Meta's insincerity to myself—the opinion she had so freely expressed about me—had pained me more than I can well tell. I had, it is true, at times, doubted her. Then my unexpected meeting with Mr. Cameron! I was thankful that was over.

I should not have gone to Mrs. Cameron's that evening had I known her son would have been home. As it was, I was not sorry that the meeting—which, moving as we did in the same circles, I knew I could not avoid—was over. Like many other things, it had been less difficult in reality than I had anticipated. It had convinced me of my indifference.

But what was the tie between Hugh Ralston and Meta Gray? Was it a secret? I could not think it—a crime! Evidently both desired silence on the subject; and my cheeks burned painfully as I thought of the conversation I had overheard. Hugh Ralston's words, mysterious though they were, had not changed my already high opinion of him. He was, to all appearance, as much

discomposed as I was by the events of the evening ; for I heard him, in his room above my own, pacing up and down restlessly, and, to the sound of his measured tread, I finally fell asleep.

He had gone out when I came down, rather late, the next morning. I did not see him till just before tea, when he came, for a moment, into the sitting-room.

“Miss Sidney, I have rather a strange request to make of you. Will you come to the office one moment? A little boy fell, a few moments since, on the pavement, cutting his forehead rather severely. The cut needs a stitch or two, and some one must hold the child. My assistant has gone home ; and though the mother is there, she is so nervous, she says, that she is perfectly useless. What in the world has a mother to do with nerves?”

Part of this explanation was given as I followed him across the hall to the office. It was not the first time I had been called in on similar occasions ; for my father was of opinion that a woman should be able to act, if necessary.

The child's forehead was soon attended ; no very serious injury any way — only a good deal of blood spilt, doing more harm to the boy's clothes than anything else. The mother sat hiding her face till the brief operation, a very simple matter, was over.

“How brave you are, Miss Elliott!” she said to me. “I wish I was ; but the sight of blood does so unnerve me. I nearly fainted when I first saw Johnnie's face.”

“It don't require much bravery,” I said, smiling. “You should try to control yourself.”

“I wish I could indeed. You should be a doctor's wife, Miss Elliott.”

It was a very trifling matter, to be sure ; but Hugh Ral-

ston could not get over it. He spoke again on the subject as we all sat together, later in the evening.

“I am glad to see you, at least, are not troubled with nerves, Miss Sidney.”

“I am afraid I should find them very troublesome companions,” I said. “I felt really sorry for that woman to-day.”

“More than I did! If she had chosen to exert herself, she could have done all that was necessary. She should have had more self-command.”

“I can give you a worse instance—in your own sex, too, Hugh,” my mother observed. “A clergyman, in this town, too, refused, not long since, to visit one of his church-members, dying of small-pox, because he was afraid of the contagion.”

“He ought to have been put out of his profession!” Ralston exclaimed. “There are three professions which require courage, moral as well as physical: a soldier’s, a clergyman’s, and my own; and of the three, the last needs most.”

“I cannot say much for that particular minister,” I said. “It seems to me that, like a soldier, a clergyman should go, unquestioning, where his duty calls him.”

“I wonder what the world would call a physician who would refuse his services in such a case! He would be called a coward; and he would deserve the name! Yet, Mrs. Elliott, you know our life is no easy one. From the first steps it takes nerve. I have seen strong men faint in the dissecting-room, when they fearlessly would have marched to the very cannon’s mouth! not from fear—though there was danger there; for the slightest scratch, the merest abrasion of the skin, in contact with that dead humanity, will cause death in one of its most horrible

forms — but from the mere thought of using the knife on those motionless forms.”

I shuddered. “Yet they become used to it.”

“As to everything, in time. And sometimes it requires considerable courage to obey all the calls made upon us.”

“Do you never hesitate,” I asked, “about going where you know there is danger of infection?”

“Miss Sidney, you — Dr. Elliott’s daughter — to ask such a question! I have no right to think of self in such a case.”

“Right!” my mother said, softly.

“You think highly of your profession, I see.”

“It is a first-rate one in which to prosecute the study of human nature; one learns more of that in a year’s practice than from a thousand books.”

“Aye! because books only give you the surface,” I said. “I never read a novel — and I confess I have read a good many — which gave a correct picture of life. You go behind the scenes.”

“More than I like, sometimes. But you find good where you least expect it.”

“Like the pearl in the oyster?” I asked mischievously.

He quoted, in reply :

“Sweet are the uses of Adversity,
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head.”

If you went among the poor, as I am compelled to do, you would be amazed to see what people can bear and have to endure; and you would be surprised to see how many noble traits are displayed — how weak, frail women

bear things which would make your blood run cold were I even to relate them."

"We have always been noted for fortitude," my mother said. "I have heard physicians themselves say women had more of that passive courage than men."

"Your friend of this evening, for instance," I put in.

He laughed. "It is to be hoped there are not many like her. Miss Sidney, are you disposed to try your skill at chess?"

I was; and the rest of the evening was devoted to that fascinating game.

Hugh Ralston and I were fast becoming friends. But there was one point we never touched, one subject we never discussed; and that was—Meta Gray. She was at our house a great deal in those days, coming there in the early evening. My mother, with whom she was a great favorite, would detain her. I sometimes wondered at Hugh Ralston's manner to her. It was indescribable. Thoroughly polite and gentlemanly, for he could not be otherwise, he yet seemed indifferent to her many attractions. Sometimes Mr. Merton would come for his niece; then, at others, Hugh would escort her home, as a matter of course. Once or twice, returning home, I met them, walking together; but, strange to say, though Meta still professed (I had learned the value of those professions) affection for me, and there was still a sort of intimacy between us—the remnant, on my part, of habit—and though Dr. Ralston spoke freely enough to both my mother and myself on nearly every other subject, neither of them ever mentioned the other's name. I soon learned to be equally silent.

I was not naturally curious; yet, like the gray parrot so often quoted, "I thought the more."

“I wonder if those two will not make a match,” my mother said, one evening, after Meta had left us. “They would be a handsome couple.”

I was silent.

“Sidney, I wonder if you will ever marry.”

“Me, mother! I’m in no hurry, unless you are anxious to get rid of me.”

“My dear girl, no. I would keep you with me as long as I can. But I should be sorry to see you always single: my own married life was so happy, that some day I hope to see you as happy in a home of your own.”

“I am very happy as it is,” I said. “Mother, I am not afraid of being an old maid.”

“You can be just as useful in that sphere of life as in any other, Sidney; and I would not give you to every one.”

“I shall require some one very charming,” I said, laughing. “Time enough yet, mother.”

She smiled at my tone. “I wish —” she began.

But at that moment the door opened. Hugh Ralston had returned, and my mother never finished her wish; and I never thought to ask her.

CHAPTER XIX.

A DISCOVERY.

SUMMER came, and with it days of almost unequalled heat. They began early in June. The sun, his rays unintercepted by a single cloud, poured them down upon us with an intensity equal, I imagine, to that he displays in the tropics. Evening brought no refreshment—no coolness—the short summer nights were only more endurable than the days.

I had thought that my intercourse with Will Cameron was at an end. I had merely exchanged greetings with him at his sister's party, at which he had so unexpectedly made his appearance; and, judging by my own feelings, I should have thought he would have avoided me.

However, I was mistaken. Meta, to all appearance, had lost her influence over him. He was polite to her when they met; but, though she treated him as she had always done, he seemed proof against her many fascinations.

I made no endeavor to renew our old intimacy. Pleasant though it had been while it lasted, its consequences had brought me too much discomfort for me to be desirous of its renewal. I knew myself wholly blameless, and I preferred that our paths, henceforth, should lie apart. There were other feelings involved—unacknowledged, because unsuspected; which I learned later had greatly influenced me.

But I soon saw that, so far as lay in his power, Will Cameron was determined to ignore the past. It was not long before he had recommenced his visits. He had either a new song of which I only could do justice to the accompaniment, a book I would enjoy reading, or a piece of music he was sure I had not yet added to my collection: his excuses were as numerous as his visits.

Sometimes I enjoyed them. Both Dr. Ralston and himself were men who had seen much of the world—men of intellect and refinement. But Cameron lost, while the other gained, by the comparison. It was the difference between firmness and instability, strength and weakness. I watched them both closely, till I had formed, as I thought, an unprejudiced opinion of either. I shall not give my conclusions here. If the pages I have written have not already delineated these two characters with sufficient clearness, my time has indeed been wasted.

Those evenings, then, that my mother, Hugh, Will Cameron, and I spent together, sitting, as we did, in the moonlight on the porch, were really pleasant. Long, friendly discussions—we seldom descended to gossip—filled up the time.

They were pleasant to me; yet I could not but see that Mr. Cameron would sometimes willingly have converted our quartet into a duo. I hoped this was not seen by the others, but it was only too perceptible to me. So far as lay in my power, I was determined to avoid all reference to the past. I gave him, in truth, no opportunity. So soon as our music was over, I would join the others: did he propose reading aloud, I was sure they would wish to share the projected pleasure.

But a man who is bent on a certain purpose will generally accomplish it. A day came when all my plans came

to naught, and the interview I had so long avoided was, in a manner, forced upon me.

Dr. Ralston had gone out to visit a patient, and would not return till late—it was barely possible he might be detained all night. My mother, complaining of a slight headache, had retired early. And I, not caring to follow her example, had taken advantage of my solitude to spend the evening at the piano.

I played on and on, forgetful of everything save my own music, when I heard a step on the porch; and, a moment later, Will Cameron stepped through the window opening down to the floor.

“I heard your piano, and so came in,” he said, as I rose. “Don’t get up, please. Play something for me.”

I was only too glad to comply with his request; but I could not play all the evening. “My fingers are tired,” I said, at last. “What else can I do to entertain you?”

“Come and talk to me, then. Don’t light the gas,” as I made a move in that direction. “It is a shame to lose such moonlight. Look out on the night, Miss Sidney.”

I came to the window by which he was seated. It had been one of those fearfully hot days of which I have spoken, but this evening the temperature was delicious. Such a night as it was! The moonlight, almost brilliant enough to read by, flooded everything with its soft radiance; the trees, in all the beauty of their summer foliage, gently bowed in the light breeze which, passing over the rose-bushes now in the full luxuriance of their first bloom, came laden with sweet odors. There was no sound save the rustling of the leaves—a perfect stillness pervaded the scene. I made some few trifling remarks on the beauty of the evening. Mr. Cameron answered me at

random. I soon found he was more intent on his own thoughts than attentive to external objects.

“This is something like our old evenings,” he said, breaking from its stem one of the roses which grew against the house. “I believe this is the first time I have seen you alone since my return.”

What could I say! I certainly would not confess that this had been intentional on my part. I wisely kept silence.

He turned to me abruptly. “I may as well make the most of this opportunity. Sidney, I wrote to you from Pittsburg, on my way West; did you receive my letter?”

Still I was silent.

He waited for my reply. “You will not speak? Silent! I am answered. Why did you give me no reply?”

“I did not think one necessary, Mr. Cameron.” I saw that I must answer.

“Unnecessary! If I had not wished for a reply, I should not have written.”

“What could I have said to you?” I asked. “Your note I did receive. Had I written, it would only have been to assure you of my sympathy with you in your disappointment; and why need you have wished for that assurance? You knew I felt for you, and blamed Meta.”

“I do not want to talk of her,” he said, passionately. “That madness, infatuation — call it what you will — is over. She, herself, cured me of it most effectually, and I thank her for it! What a world this would be, if there were many like her! Even now, knowing her as I do, there are times when it needs all my resolution to avoid falling, against my own better judgment, under her influence again!”

“I should be sorry to see that,” I said, gently.

"You need not fear it! I am too thoroughly disenchanted. I did not come here to talk of Meta Gray, however," he went on, more calmly. "That letter, hurried as it was, asked forgetfulness — forgiveness! Sidney, how do I stand with you now — am I forgiven?"

"I have nothing to forgive," I said, as calmly as I could. "The day we parted, it was as friends. We both made a mistake, Mr. Cameron. There is no need to recall the past."

"You were not used to speak to me in that cold tone," reproachfully. "I know you once loved me, and I was mad not to hold on to that love while it was mine. Sidney, by the recollection of that love I plead with you for its return. I am wiser than I was in those days — I see plainly what you are, what you can be, to me. I know now that I loved you, and you only — I cannot believe that you are wholly indifferent to me. Do you still hold me unworthy of your confidence?"

"I value your friendship —" I began.

"Friendship! I did not ask you for that! What I want is this — if my words have not been plain enough! I prize you now as I ought; I know that, under your influence, I can do much. Sidney, give me an object in life; let me feel I have you to labor for, to cheer me, and the devotion of a lifetime will be too little for me to give you in return."

My heart beat painfully. I could almost hear its pulsations; I thought they must be audible to my companion. His handsome face was upturned to mine; his deep-blue eyes looked at me, searchingly, as he awaited my reply. For a moment, I was tempted to yield — to lay my hand in his, my head on that broad shoulder — to feel there was some one between me and the world. I looked out;

the stars shone, calm and serene ; I heard only my own heart beating ; I forgot even the man who stood beside me — for in that brief moment I learned my own secret.

“I will not even ask you to pledge yourself to me,” he went on. “Only give me hope, Sidney. I know I do not deserve you, but if at some future day —”

“No, Mr. Cameron,” I said, hoarsely. “Let us drop this matter forever. I am sorry to give you this pain ; I would have spared both you and myself. Do not urge me, I entreat you.”

“I see,” with an effort, “I have forfeited your esteem.”

“Not so !” I said, eagerly. “You have proved yourself more worthy of it than ever. Some day you will thank me for this.”

“There is no hope for me, then. Well, I suppose I deserve it.” His tone was harsh, but I knew it told of suppressed emotion.

“I hope yet to see you one of our leading men,” I said, lightly. “It is in you, and no one will rejoice more in your advancement than myself.”

“Yet you deny me the greatest stimulus I could have.”

My face burned, but I was determined to proceed. “Mr. Cameron, would you win an unloving wife ?”

“Is it really so, Sidney ?” He caught my hand, looking intently into my face. I met his gaze unfalteringly. He released me, with a sigh. “Aye, I must believe you. Then, indeed, I have no hope ! I will not ask you,” with an effort, “what has wrought this change ; nor will I pain you further with unavailing solicitations : I see they are useless. Sidney ! though I am debarred the privilege I asked, I wish you all happiness !”

He stood, for a moment, deeply affected. I was no less

moved than himself, but I dared not show it. A moment more, and he was gone.

I could not sleep that night. Did I regret what I had done? Not for one moment; but I could fully sympathize with my rejected lover. There was no triumph in my thoughts, no exultation in my feelings. I felt, as I think every true-hearted woman must feel under similar circumstances, deep sorrow for the pain I had inflicted. It is no light thing for a man to offer to a woman's acceptance all he has to give: his name, his heart, his honor; no light thing to refuse these gifts, the most precious he can offer.

I had, I know, hesitated for a moment. That moment was enough. It told me that, in pledging myself to Will Cameron, in spite of my early fancy for him, I should do injustice alike to him and to myself. I had no right, where he "asked for bread, to give a stone;" no right, in return for a loving heart, to give an unwilling hand.

For, as that moment told me, I had at last met my master. The very depths of my heart were revealed to me. I knew that though I might, it was most probable I should, never lay my hand, a willing captive, in his; that I had found my fitting mate—who, I now knew, would be my first, my only love! Not the fleeting, girlish fancy I had given Will Cameron;

"And tell me how Love cometh?

Love comes, unseen, unsent;

And tell me how Love goeth?

That was not Love which went,"

but a deeper, truer feeling, which even in that moment I knew would last—part of my very self; a feeling founded on esteem, respect, admiration—the deep, un-

questioning love of a woman's heart, for the man whom, above all others, she would choose.

I had not lived in the same house with Hugh Ralston for these months without studying his character. I saw everything there to admire, nothing to blame. He truly

"Bore, without abuse,
The grand old name of gentleman."

But I had never thought of love. The consciousness of it had come upon me, suddenly: in that moment when I had stood looking upon the eternal stars—the calm eyes of heaven—my heart, through its painful beatings, had whispered to me—I could have almost said I heard the words—"You love Hugh Ralston; and, while your heart is his, how dare you give your hand to another?" That moment had saved me. It told me I had better pass through life solitary, alone, than wear a chain, even though it were gilded! For what is a loveless marriage save a galling chain—enforced duty, but penal servitude? I was content; but the knowledge of my own feelings made me only the more deeply sympathize with the young man who had just left me.

I dared not think of the future, except that my path lay plainly before me. It might lead up the "hill Adversity"—the way might be hard to my feet—I could only follow it, uncomplaining. But it was not without a pang that I thought, in all human probability, that woman's dearest, sweetest career was now closed to me—that I should never know the tender, protecting love of a husband; never be mistress of a home; never feel in my heart that purest, holiest of all affections—the only unselfish love—that of a mother for her children. I would not think of this—I tried to banish it from my mind.

"There is no cross so heavy it cannot be borne — no trial which we are not given strength to bear. And if woman's humbler, happier lot be denied me, I will take what comes, patiently."

So, with this resolution, I rose the following morning. All through that day, too, why, I could not tell, ran in my mind the refrain of Kingsley's ballad, in Meta's plaintive tones, as she had sung it the night of the concert:

"For men must work, and women must weep,
And the sooner 'tis over, the sooner to sleep."

One or two days later, I was in one of the principal book-stores of our city; it was crowded with customers — among them, Mrs. Cameron. While I waited for some one to wait on me, she came up to speak to me.

"Good evening, Miss Sidney. A pleasant evening."

"Very pleasant, after the excessive heat."

"It is very pleasant, indeed. Do you know you must congratulate me?"

"On your looking so well, Mrs. Cameron?" I said, carelessly.

"No, indeed. Can't you guess? Annie's engagement to Mr. Perkins."

"I suppose you are very much pleased," I said, as cordially as I could. "How you will miss her! I suppose it will be a brief engagement."

"So I fear!" her smiling face contradicting her tone. "It is not very delightful to lose one's olive-branches."

"But you gain by it, Mrs. Cameron."

"True, Miss Sidney; and one must resign themselves to the loss in consideration of the gain."

"My son's my son till he gets him a wife,
My daughter's my daughter all her life."

Console yourself with that, Mrs. Cameron."

“I wish my son would ‘get him a wife,’ ” she said, more earnestly than before. “I’m afraid he is going to live single, since he and Meta don’t fancy one another.”

I made no reply

“I would have liked that match,” she continued. “In point of family and fortune he could not have done better. You know, Miss Sidney, it would not do for Will to marry *anybody*.”

I bowed, wondering to myself what she would have said had she known what a narrow escape she had made from saluting me, the poor music-teacher, as Mrs. Wilford Cameron. Would I have come under the designation “*anybody*?”

“You see, with Will’s prospects, he ought to marry very well — some one I can approve of.”

One of the obsequious clerks at that moment presented himself: “Could he wait on Miss Elliott?”

Miss Elliott was very glad to bid Mrs. Cameron good evening. “Come and see Annie; she will be glad to have you congratulate her.”

“Thank you;” and I turned to make my purchases. They were very simple, only a few quires of paper, and I left the store.

I met Annie and Kate on my way home, and stopped to congratulate the former. She was very animated — quoting Mr. Perkins constantly, and flourishing her left hand, on which she wore a heavy gold ring, wickedly reminding me, in its size and thickness, of the substantial donor.

“It ought to be your turn next, Sidney,” she said, as we parted. “Or do you intend to take us all by surprise some day?”

“Just you wait, Annie,” Kate answered. “Sidney and I intend to astonish the natives some fine day.”

“Ah!” in all the serene dignity of engaged young-ladyhood. “Don’t wait too long, girls. One needs excitement in this quiet town.”

“You can afford to say so, Annie; as your time and thoughts are now fully occupied. Good night. I shall expect an invitation when the happy event comes off.”

I had for some time, as I suppose most girls do at some period of their life, kept a journal. Not regularly; it was a rambling, disconnected sort of chronicle; but, such as it was, it has materially aided me in this record. Looking over it now, I recall circumstances I had almost forgotten. I live over those bygone days. I remember, almost word for word, long conversations, and even the varying aspect of the days. But about this time I became disgusted with my diary. So long as it was limited to a mere statement of facts and actions, so well and good; but for the past few months, since I had been living a new life, that of feeling—and my journal but too faithfully portrayed it—I found I was too fully carrying out the advice of the ancient sage, “Know thyself;” and, dissatisfied with the knowledge I was acquiring, as I think we all are when we begin to understand our own nature, I laid the book aside.

But I missed my silent confidant. Reticent I had always been to an unusual degree. Deeply as I loved my mother, I had never been able to speak very freely to her; and I had no intimate friend—none, at least, to whom I would have been willing to speak on such subjects as of late had filled the pages of my diary. The thoughts which I could no longer inscribe there, must somewhere find utterance—they would have expression; and I did what I had never thought possible—began to try my powers of composition. I began a novel, more to occupy my

thoughts than from any other motive : not for want of occupation ; for my music-lessons filled the day, my evenings were spent with my mother, Dr. Ralston always joining us when it lay in his power ; and the only time I had for writing was the daily half-hour I had of late, just before retiring, given to my journal.

But I was not satisfied with my attempt. I wrote and rewrote the first few chapters, and even when I had done my best, I was not content. Still I persevered, until I had written, I suppose, about twenty or thirty pages. Circumstances then occurred which induced me to lay aside my pen, only to be resumed at a later period.

The days went on, each one bringing its own round, its own task. Almost before I knew it, my vacation came. I did not welcome it this year as I had done before. Not that my occupation was so very delightful to me, but I dreaded the fact of my having nothing to do. To prevent this, I made plans for every hour in the day. So much time I would give to my pen, so many hours to my piano. My garden, now in its full beauty of bloom, should receive its full share of attention ; I would read ; and the evenings should go on as before. I would enter more into society ; in a word, I would do everything in my power to escape from myself.

I do not think that any one suspected my feelings, my restlessness and discontent. I know that my mother never did ; though, living as we did constantly together, one might have thought she would have seen that I was changed.

I scarcely knew myself. The year which had opened for me with such bright prospects, as I thought, found me, ere it was much more than half gone, greatly altered. From the proud, sensitive girl, I had become the serious,

thoughtful woman. I had learned, as all women must learn some time or other, better early than late, that

“Much must be borne which it is hard to bear,
Much given away which it were sweet to keep.”

Weeks passed, with nothing to mark them. I saw little of Mr. Cameron, save a passing bow in the street. I heard he was, just now, very attentive to his business. Annie was busy preparing for her approaching marriage. Meta came occasionally to see me ; more, I imagined, for the sake of meeting Hugh, than for any love of me. I did not want to be uncharitable, but I could not help the thought. She evidently liked him — would he pluck the flower so plainly, I thought, within his grasp?

I have said these weeks were without incident. A change was coming — events, one after the other, were to come crowding into my life. I did not know it ; but even then, influences were at work, producing circumstances which were to control my whole future.

So, like travellers in a new country, we follow paths blindly, unknowing whither they may lead us. It may be through fertile plains, or sandy deserts. Who knows?

CHAPTER XX.

WHAT CAME OF THE STORM.

MISS Sidney, do you feel disposed to take a ride this fine morning? or are you too much interested in your book to be willing to leave it?" and a handful of rose-leaves fell on the pages open before me.

I had been sitting, quietly reading, in a very comfortable arm-chair, when I was thus interrupted.

I threw aside my book. "Who gave you leave to trespass among my flowers?"

"Now, don't scold, if you please! I could not resist the temptation of pulling some roses, overblown too, with which to disturb your studies; in which, by the way, you did not seem particularly interested."

"What are you doing here at this hour of the morning? I thought you were safely away, among your patients."

He shook his head comically. "Fairfield and my patients are unusually healthy this morning. Like Othello, 'my occupation's gone.' I have a few hours' leisure; won't you share them with me? My buggy is at the door, and I am your most obedient."

I glanced at my dress, a white wrapper. "Can you wait a few moments?"

"Not for you to change your dress. I give you five minutes to don hat and gloves."

I ran up stairs, caught up a light shawl, put on my hat,

and drew my gloves on as I came down. Dr. Ralston was walking up and down the piazza, his watch in his hand.

“You had just half a minute to spare. If you had not been down in time! Come, jump in. Mrs. Elliott,” as my mother appeared in the door, “we are going to run away.”

“Come back in time for dinner, if you please. I hope you’ll have a pleasant drive.”

It was—very pleasant. The horse, a good trotter, went easily along the smooth roads; the low, easy, physician’s carriage rolled rapidly on, the very perfection of motion. August though it was, it was more like a day in June, when, as the poet sings, “if ever, come perfect days,” and this sweet summer-day was among those “perfect days.”

We drove along, through green lanes, past comfortable farm-houses, by the banks of the winding creeks; along the fields where the harvest was going on; far away from the town, of which, occasionally, we caught a glimpse, as the windings of the road brought us at times to some elevated spot, from whence we could see Fairfield, its white steeples pointing to the clear, blue sky, its houses embedded in a mass of green—a city among hills. We talked together gayly, carelessly—of books, of city and country life. We discussed many topics that pleasant morning.

“Do you know it is somewhat late, Miss Sidney?” Dr. Ralston said, finally, looking at his watch. “We shall be late for dinner as it is; so our pleasant drive must terminate. Some day we will come on another exploring expedition.”

He turned the horse’s head homewards as he spoke.

The animal, as those sensible creatures always do, knew he was going home, and he trotted on as rapidly as ever. The distance lessened swiftly under the regular motion of those flying feet, and we were soon within a mile of Fairfield.

There we paused to admire the view. We were higher than the town, which lay at our feet, and we both involuntarily exclaimed at the beauty of the scene. Dr. Ralston was an ardent lover of nature, and, glancing round, his quick eye soon discerned a squirrel perched on a tree overhanging the road.

“Look at that fellow, Miss Sidney. Will you hold the lines a moment while I go and see if I can find his nest? I am as bad as any boy after such matters. You need not be afraid of the horse—he is used to standing.”

“And you can bring me some of those flowers,” I said, pointing to a cluster of bright yellow blossoms growing near the fence which enclosed the little wood by which we had stopped. There are not many woods in the vicinity of Fairfield; land there is too valuable to be left uncultivated. “I want to see what they are.”

“Very well,” getting out of the carriage as he spoke. “I’ll not be many minutes.”

And off he went into the wood; but he was gone longer than I had anticipated. He came back at last, very slowly.

“There are your flowers, Miss Sidney; but Mr. Squirrel has brought me into trouble.”

He laid the flowers on my lap as he spoke, and I noticed that he was very pale.

“What is the matter?” I asked, hurriedly.

“Nothing very serious,” trying to smile; “only a sprained wrist, which is and will be very painful.”

"How did you manage to injure yourself in those few moments?" I said, as, following his directions, I hastily bandaged the injured wrist—the right one, too—with my handkerchief; and with his, being larger, made a sling.

"Trying to do one of my old boyish feats—to swing myself to the ground from a tree I had climbed after the squirrel. I used to do it, years ago—I had forgotten I was heavier now. I did the thing, but here's the penalty."

He managed to get into the buggy.

"The next thing is to get home. You will have to drive, being mistress of ceremonies now. Are you equal to the position? You see I am powerless."

He was, indeed, very pale, and evidently in pain.

"I can manage it," quietly. "Fortunately, we have not far to go."

"I believe I had rather have broken my arm at once," he said, as we drove up to the door. "These things are more painful, and take longer to heal. Miss Sidney, I am not sorry to be home; this arm needs firmer bandaging than we have given it."

My mother came to meet us, ready to scold for our delay. She exclaimed at seeing the bandaged arm. A few words proved sufficient explanation.

"You will come right into the house," as Dr. Ralston stated his intention of seeking a doctor. "No, Hugh, you can send your boy to Dr. Kennedy's, and you must come in and wait."

"Dear Mrs. Elliott, the time will seem twice as long."

They kept up their friendly dispute some few moments.

"Mother," I said, "don't you know 'a wilful man must have his way?' Let him go; he might have been at the doctor's and back by this time."

But Dr. Kennedy's passing at that moment stopped the discussion. Ralston called him, and the two M. D.'s followed us into the house, where the injured member soon received the necessary attention.

"Not a very pleasant adventure, Ralston," Dr. Kennedy said, as, the brief work over, they came into our sitting-room. "You will have to submit to the loss of your arm for a few weeks; but you will have two first-rate nurses, and the more quiet you keep the better."

"The hardest prescription you could have given him, doctor," my mother said, laughing. "Tranquillity is perfect punishment to him."

Dr. Kennedy smiled. "I leave the case in your hands, Mrs. Elliott. You will have an obstinate patient, as I know by experience—witness his conduct in Brown's case."

Brown being the brakesman whose limb the said obstinacy had saved.

"You acknowledged that I was right there, Kennedy."

"You had the best of *that* business. I am glad I happened to be passing this morning. Anything I can do for you, Ralston, I shall be glad to do. Good morning, ladies."

Hugh proved, as Dr. Kennedy—who, by the way, was one of our leading physicians—had said, a very obstinate patient. He would go out, would exert himself, and the consequence was that he only suffered the more. His wrist, at times, gave him intense pain, and finally he had to resign himself to keeping quiet.

"I don't think I shall try gymnastics again in a hurry," he said to me one morning, as we sat together. "It don't pay, as my arm most forcibly reminds me."

But some of those mornings, in spite of the suffering

that unlucky sprain occasioned, were very pleasant. I could almost have thought I was living over my last vacation. Hugh Ralston, however, was far superior to my former companion. We read together, but it was no longer only poetry which filled the time ; that was read, but only as a relaxation. We read Carlyle, in all his quaint, peculiar English—an affectation, as Dr. Ralston called it, and at which he pretended to grumble, though at heart he liked it—De Quincy, and some of the beautiful writings of our own Irving. But the pleasantest parts of those mornings were the long talks into which we would fall, my mother, herself a woman of no small abilities, always taking part in them. We learned to know each other well in those days.

I had one morning been reading Hale's strange tale, which has probably gained more faith in its truth than any other fictitious narrative I know of—"The Man without a Country." That evening I spoke of it.

It had been a gloomy, sultry day, late in August ; no sun, only light, gray clouds floating near the earth ; no breeze, not even enough to move the light, drooping branches of the willow-trees. Towards evening, however, the clouds thickened, the gray fleeciness changed into a heavier, darker mass, and by the time the twilight came—earlier than usual on account of the veil of clouds obscuring the sky—the rain was falling, not slowly nor gently, but in hard, plashing drops ; while the only sound in the stillness of nature was the low muttering of distant thunder—the only light through the fast-growing gloom the faint flashes of lightning along the horizon.

"What were you so intent upon this morning?" Ralston asked me, as, with a half sigh, I turned from the window, where, for some minutes, I had stood.

“‘There is no light in all the heaven,
Not the pale light of stars’—

so you may as well come and sit down, and tell me what book so interested you that you neither saw nor heard me, though I stood near you for almost ten minutes.”

“An old number of the ‘Atlantic,’” I replied. “There was an article in it which greatly interested me— ‘The Man without a Country.’”

“The ‘Atlantic’ *has* some good things in it occasionally. I have read the article you mention—it is a queer, fantastic production.”

“I scarcely think those are the right adjectives for you to apply; they suit Poe’s tales better. This, I think, is the saddest story I ever read.”

“It is well written, too. I accept your correction, Miss Sidney; even the name of the hero, Nolan—*no land*—has meaning.”

“I never thought of that,” I said, candidly. “I think what I most noticed was the fact of his having *no home*. To me there is no sadder thought.”

“Home—those four letters have a wide meaning. They include all that makes life most precious and most desirable.”

“Did you ever think,” I asked, “that the French, though their language has so many varied forms of expression, have yet no word to express ‘home’?”

“Aye; and it only goes to prove their light, volatile character. The politest nation in the world have no word to express the most sacred spot on earth.”

“Home, sweet home—there’s no place like home!”

He smiled at my rather hackneyed quotation.

“And the writer of that old song was a wanderer all his

life. He had no home, though he who could so well tell of its pleasures, fully deserved to enjoy them. What did he find?—a grave on a foreign shore; not even a resting-place in his native land!”

We were both silent. The thunder came nearer and nearer, the lightning flashes grew more and more vivid—the storm without was at its height.

Ralston got up and paced slowly up and down the room. “I have never told you, Miss Sidney, how I have valued being in your home—or what it has been to me. I did not know how I valued it till the last few weeks. This,” touching his arm as he spoke, “has opened my eyes to many things; and now I may have to give it all up.”

“Are you going to leave Fairfield?”

He took no notice of my question. Stopping his walk, he came and stood near me, one arm resting on the mantel—his hand, in the gesture I well knew told of anxiety, smoothing the mustache shading his lip.

“Like all men, I have dreamed of a home of my own—a home with a wife, to make it a small piece of heaven. Sidney, it rests with you if these dreams are to be realized.”

“I do not know,” he went on, his voice trembling, very different from his usual firm tones, “that I am using the right words—I never before asked any woman to become my wife. I do not promise to make you happy, Sidney; I cannot insure that to you; but what man can do to that end I will do. You are more to me than I dare to think: it all ends in this—I love you!”

What could I say? Like many a woman before, what he was to me, I well knew; I had never thought what I might be to him. He was so far above me, that the idea

that he could love me was something I could not realize. I could not speak, though I would have given the world for words—but they failed me. I could only bury my face in my hands.

“So you can give me nothing in return,” he said, after a moment’s pause, during which I felt his eyes were upon me. “I would have spoken before, but I feared this result. Well—it must be borne!”

But I had found my voice at last. He had turned from me and bowed his head on his hand. I touched his arm, laying my hand lightly on it. He looked up, his face working with strong emotion.

“I am not worthy of you,” I said, my face burning with blushes; “but such as I am—”

I never finished the sentence. There was no need—we understood each other.

We sat, till late, in sweet communion. I was perfectly happy. The prize for which I had so longed was at last within my grasp—no fear of its turning to dust and ashes in my hands.

“My mother,” I said at last; “I had nearly forgotten her! What will she say to this?”

He laughed gayly. “Do you think I would have spoken to you, Sidney, living as we do in the same house, without her consent? She knew this weeks ago; and I had, as she expressed it, her unqualified good wishes.”

During all this the loud thunder-claps had, at intervals, shaken the house. Hugh had hardly spoken the last words when one, more violent than any of the preceding, seemed to roll directly over our heads. I started violently.

“Hugh, listen! I am almost tempted to fear this is an evil omen! Can it foretell our future life?”

“Nonsense! Sidney, the storm is over. If you are superstitious, look out on the night. It promises fair.”

He drew me gently to the window as he spoke. He was right, the storm was over. The clap which had so startled me was its last effort. A light breeze had sprung up, driving the clouds from the sky, and they were swiftly disappearing. One by one the stars had come out, till the heavens were thickly bespangled with their twinkling radiance; the air was full of a sweet “dewy freshness,” and all was peace and tranquillity. The war of the elements was over.

“Take my augury instead of your own, Sidney,” Hugh said to me, as we stood side by side. “All is calm between us now, like the night we are looking upon; and if storms should come, as come they will in every human life, we will breast them together. You helping me, I helping you, we will go on together—each the other aiding. Are you content to view it as I do?”

I was—and after a few more words our interview was over.

My sleep that night was sweet. Dreamlessly the hours of the night passed away; and when I awoke in the morning, refreshed, it was with a sense of all-pervading happiness. Nature, bright and cheerful after the storm, seemed almost to sympathize with my joy. I lingered in my room, loath to leave the sweet fancies that hovered around me there. I thought of Hugh—*my* Hugh: how natural that seemed already! I tried to picture to myself the glad future that his words had promised to me. I could hardly realize my own happiness—yes, the long struggle for self-control was over. Heart and head were no longer at variance.

When I came down stairs I found my mother and Hugh

standing together awaiting me. I had thought I should feel embarrassed at meeting them, but I did not. As collectedly as I ever did in my life I walked into the room, to my mother's side, just in time to hear her say, as she passed her arm around me :

“There is no one, Hugh, to whom I would more willingly give my child than to you. She has been a good daughter ; she will be a good wife. I am the gainer : I have two children now. You cannot seem more like my own son than you do now, Hugh.”

It was a happy trio that gathered around our breakfast-table that morning. A silent party it was—but our deepest, holiest feelings are the last to express themselves in words. For

“It is with feelings as with waters :

The shallow murmur, but the deep are dumb.”

“I cannot realize it, mother,” I said, after Hugh very unwillingly had left us for his daily attendance on his patients. “I cannot believe it : it seems like a dream ! And oh ! how little I deserve it all !”

“I have no fears for your future, Sidney. It is in safe hands.”

CHAPTER XXI.

HALCYON DAYS.

THE few remaining weeks of my vacation glided rapidly by. Such happy weeks! Dr. Ralston was with me constantly. He lost nothing in this close intercourse; every day only showed me something more to admire in his noble character—something to give him a new claim on my esteem.

What had become of all my doubts regarding him and Meta Gray? They were completely forgotten, as though they had never existed. I had such full confidence in the man of my choice, such perfect reliance on his honor and worthiness, that my naturally suspicious nature seemed changed—a change strange even to myself. To his will I yielded my own; I submitted myself wholly to his guidance. I gave up to him as never before had I done to any human being.

I do not think that even in those days he guessed how much I loved him. I would scarcely confess it to myself. Naturally undemonstrative, the very strength of my feelings made me only the more anxious to conceal them.

“I want you to give me perfect confidence, as I do you,” he had said to me one day. “Without it, there can be no happiness in married life. You are inclined to be suspicious and jealous, Sidney: you should strive to overcome both.”

“Have I ever shown either feeling to you?”

"No, but they exist, and, when you least expect it, will show themselves. Don't look at me so reproachfully, dear. I only want to warn you. If anything troubles you, come to me: ask me what you will, you will only hear the truth from me. A trifle, unexplained, grows at times into a mountain of mistrust. Let it not be so with us."

"I do not think anything would make me doubt you," I said earnestly.

"I hope nothing ever will. Yet, under some circumstances, a little thing you might consider not worth mentioning, it would seem so unimportant; under others you would brood over. I do not say you will do it, Sidney: I only ask you, no matter what it costs you, no matter what it may cost me to answer you, to come to me. I have no fear," laughing at my very serious expression, "of any cross-examination to which you may see fit to subject me. I only ask you not to judge me unheard."

He read my character better than I did myself.

We had decided that the engagement should remain a secret as long as it was possible. It concerned no one, and we had no one to consult. It was not necessary that the busy world should be admitted to our privacy. I think both Hugh and I felt it would have been almost a desecration to parade our happiness before others. My mother approved of our intentions. It was very different from the enforced secrecy attending my first engagement—a secrecy I had always felt had something disgraceful in it, and to which I had most unwillingly submitted. Hugh had no relatives who were likely to interfere, and we preferred that for the present the world should know nothing of our affairs. So I was, for a while, to go on with my music-lessons, partly that our secret might be the

better kept, partly because I should need the money I would thereby earn for the necessary preparations.

It would not, however, be long a secret. Hugh objected to long engagements, and my mother agreed with him. I did not like them myself. I knew how "hope deferred made the heart sick;" how those long, useless delays wore on the temper, imbittering and souring it, till all the first freshness and sweetness of affection subsided into a species of quiet regard; and I did not object when Hugh pleaded for an early day.

There was, in truth, no necessity for any delay. But the time which he and my mother fixed upon, for I left it in her hands, was earlier than I had anticipated. Hugh expected to visit Illinois on business in November—he wished me to accompany him, but my mother objected to this. He would not return till late in December, and she thought a long journey at that season of the year would be too much for me. So we were to be married at Christmas.

I had wished to wait at least till spring, but my wishes were, as I have said, overruled. After all, the marriage would make no essential difference; we would still occupy our old home, only my mother would resign the housekeeping to me. She had, at first, spoken of leaving us, but neither Hugh nor I would even listen to this for a moment.

"My home is yours, Mrs. Elliott, so long as I have one. If I am to be your son, you must allow me all a son's privileges. Besides, Sidney could not do without you, nor, for that matter, could I either; so never let me hear another word on that subject. Dear Mrs. Elliott, you want to make me appear very selfish—first, to take your daughter from you, and then send you from your home?

Never ! I hope always to have you in our household, its most honored member."

So that matter was settled to the satisfaction of all parties. Much as my mother was pleased with my choice, I believe it would have broken her heart had I been compelled to leave her ; and not even for Hugh Ralston would I have done it. I loved him only the better for his goodness to her.

I did not expect to make any very great preparations—I had neither the time nor the money requisite. At Hugh's request I was to lay aside my mourning, which I felt myself was unsuited to a bride. What I needed, my mother and I, in my few leisure moments, made ; laying each garment, as it was completed, in drawers fragrant with the dying breath of rose-leaves, gathered, as was our wont, through the summer—the old-fashioned damask rose, fragrant above all others.

There were many sweet thoughts stitched into my simple wardrobe—sweet and pleasant fancies. A song of peace ever sounded in my ears ; and were I for a moment discouraged, one glance at the plain gold ring I wore, Hugh's only gift, drove away all painful thoughts. That little circle on my finger bounded all my life.

"I will not give you jewels now, Sidney, nor load you with presents. It is a custom I greatly dislike ; as if affection could be bought or strengthened with gifts. Time enough for that some future day."

And I did not want presents. I was satisfied with what I already possessed—the undivided affection of a noble heart.

We spent every moment together that we could. They were not many, for Hugh's practice was larger than ever, and I had resumed my duties with my pupils. These

duties, I expected, would finally end in December, and the Christmas holidays would be the beginning of a new life for me.

A new life! It promised to be a happy one.

"Do you know you are looking remarkably well?" Mrs. Merton said to me, one day. "Why, you have quite a color! But why do we see so little of you now-a-days? Are you giving up the world in your old age?"

"Dear Mrs. Merton! I am kept so busy just now! After a while I shall have more leisure than I have at present."

"Your work don't seem to hurt you, any how," patting my cheek. "Meta says she never sees you, either: you should not keep so much to yourself."

I knew I was looking better. Happiness had brought the color to my cheek and a light to my eye. Even Hugh noticed the change.

"You are not my pale-faced, demure Sidney of last summer. She was a frail, delicate damsel; this is a rosy country-maiden. I wonder if I am asleep or awake." My answer to this was a pretty severe pinch of his arm. "Stop! child! I have *some* feeling left! I guess I must be awake, though how do I know but you are a fairy? Old stories say they pinch those who offend them."

"Have you found out yet if you are awake?" I saucily inquired.

"Is this a specimen of the *honor* and *obedience* you are to promise me some of these days? I shall have a most submissive little wife! How will it be, Mrs. Ralston!"

I ran out of the room. I heard him laugh, not discontentedly; he knew any reference to that always made me beat a hasty retreat.

Why do I linger over these trifles? Ah! every occur-

rence of that happy time dwells in my memory. Even now, my pulses thrill, my cheeks flush, my heart beats, as I recall some of the slightest occurrences of those happy days.

October passed—the Indian summer, that lovely season of the year, glowed on the hills; the trees had worn and lost their many-colored foliage. The birds had long since left us for a warmer climate. Again we gathered around the cheerful blaze of the grate, when, one evening, Hugh informed us he must leave us on the morrow.

He had that day received letters which informed him that his presence was immediately necessary. Some complications, legal technicalities, had arisen in the final settlement of his father's estate, the business which called him West, and he had to be on the spot.

“It is very annoying; under any other circumstances I would be only too glad to be able to visit my old home and my friends. But just now, to be compelled to be absent nearly two months, when I thought two weeks would be sufficient, is more than provoking.”

And I was as disappointed as he was.

He was most unwilling to bid me good-bye.

“I am almost tempted to wait another day and ask you to go with me,” he said, in the half-hour before his departure. “Sidney, I cannot bear to leave you; I almost dread our separation! Once I laughed at you for being a little superstitious: I am afraid you might bring the same charge against me to-day.”

“I would like to know what you are afraid of?” I said, trying to cheer him. “It is not likely I shall be spirited away before your return, or turned into a statue. You’ll find me here, safe and sound, when you return.”

"I wish that day was come already; or, still better, that I could take you with me."

"You unreasonable creature!" my mother said as she came in. "Can't you wait till Christmas? As it is, we shall be hurried enough. Hugh, it is a rather unromantic fact; but, indeed, if you linger longer over your adieux you will be too late for the train."

"And that won't wait for you," I said with more cheerfulness than I really felt. "Why, I am braver than you are; I can actually 'speed the parting guest.'"

My mother smiled.

"Why, Hugh! you are not apt to be so nervous!"

He caught both my hands in his, forgetful of my mother's presence.

"Sidney! my darling! (he had never given me that name before;) you will trust me even as I trust you during my absence! You will let no shadow come between us! Rest assured I will not be absent one day longer than I can help."

My mother drew me away from him.

"Hugh, one would think you were to be absent six years instead of six weeks! They will soon be over. I will take care of Sidney for you; and only think how soon you will meet again."

Six weeks! It would be many a long day before we three would stand together again as we did that morning, though we none of us knew it! There were trials in store for us of which we little dreamed. But Hugh's depression, causeless though it seemed, had infected me with a portion of his uneasiness; and, scarcely knowing why I did it, I stood and watched his tall figure, as, with firm tread, he rapidly walked down the street. I watched him — only too proud to think of my claim upon him —

proud to think he had chosen me ; pleased at his evident reluctance to leave me.

I disliked the separation. I knew *how* I should miss him, for only I knew what he was to me. Little did I think, as I watched his retreating figure, how many long, weary days it would be before Hugh Ralston and I, if ever, would look again on each other's faces.

I only thought now of our re-union. Six weeks, and he would return to Fairfield, though not to our house. During his absence it was thought best our engagement should be announced. On his return he would go to one of the hotels ; and two weeks later, on Christmas eve, we were to be married, and he would come home.

Hugh proved a capital correspondent. His letters, which came regularly, were perfect transcripts of himself. I could almost imagine, as I read them, that I heard him speaking to me, they were so very characteristic—very entertaining, too, full of descriptions of people and things. Their arrival was quite an epoch to my mother and myself, for there were very few of them in which I was not able to read whole pages to her.

I was glad to see that in his very first letter he laughed at his own "foolish fears," as he called them.

"I wonder," he wrote, "if, after all, I was not afraid of the journey? Somehow, that long railroad train seemed like some hideous monster, ready to devour or carry me off. Very absurd, was n't it? The iron horse truly does wonders, but it certainly is no ogre, to feed on human flesh. The journey, in this fast age, was a very trifling matter—a little fatiguing, I must confess ; but I had not been an hour on my way before I began to laugh at myself for my own foolish imaginings, as I suppose you and Mrs. Elliott both did before I was fairly out of

sight. I was troubling myself about a shadow—as if there were not enough real trials in the world, without our disturbing ourselves about imaginary evils. You see ‘Richard is himself again.’ ”

I missed him terribly; but his bright, cheerful letters did much to lessen my regret at his absence. I do not think mine were anything like the comfort to him, that his were to me. I wrote freely of all I thought would interest him, but he scolded at my ‘prim’ letters, as he called them.

I don’t believe, much as my mother liked Hugh, that she greatly regretted his present absence. She was surprised at the small outfit I considered sufficient, certainly not such as a heavier purse would have secured; and I think she was pleased to have me, for these few last weeks, wholly to herself. Then, too, she could, in my leisure hours, persuade me to ply my needle with her, a feminine occupation I always had heartily despised.

As yet, no one knew of my new plans. I believe I prized my happiness the more because it was, as it were, all my own.

I came home rather early one afternoon, about three weeks after Hugh’s departure, to find Mrs. Merton and my mother sitting together in earnest conversation. To my great astonishment, Mrs. Merton got up and kissed me heartily.

“I am so glad, Sidney. You need not blush so, child: your mother has been telling me all about it. I do not wonder at your looking so well of late; happiness is a great beautifier. And this explains your having so little time lately. Dr. Ralston and I will quarrel if he is going to monopolize you. I shall tell him your friends have some claim on you.”

I thanked her for her congratulations.

"But you have kept it so very quiet! Sidney, you might at least have told me!"

"No one knows it, as yet, except yourself," my mother said. "You are the first we have told."

"And am I pledged to secrecy?"

"No," my mother replied, before I could speak. "It had best be known now. They are to be married at Christmas, and there is no use in keeping it quiet any longer."

"Right!" Mrs. Merton said. "I don't believe in concealments. Sidney, if you don't ask me to the wedding I will never forgive you. Remember that, or beware of my displeasure."

It might be right, but I did not like the publicity. As in other towns of its size, our people in Fairfield, kind-hearted though they might be, were only too fond of gossip, and a new engagement was something they particularly loved to discuss. I knew my prospects would be talked about among my whole circle of acquaintance—that they would know more than I did myself; and worst of all, to my shy, proud disposition, I would be congratulated and questioned unmercifully—I would be, for a while, public property.

But, most of all, I hated the proclamation, as it seemed, of my innermost feelings. It detracted, as it were, from the sanctity of my engagement. That was something which had belonged exclusively to Hugh and myself, and now the whole world of Fairfield knew our sweet secret.

I believe I prepared for my next round of duty with something of the same feeling with which, in olden times, women falsely accused, knowing themselves to be inno-

cent, bared their feet and bowed their heads to receive the bandage over their eyes before walking blindfolded over red-hot ploughshares. To my sensitive nature—and only similar dispositions can understand or enter into my feelings—it was nearly as great an ordeal.

I lingered till the last minute, willing to put off the evil day. My mother, for the first time in years, spoke a little severely to me.

“Sidney, would you have Hugh think you are ashamed of him?”

I turned to her. “Not for one moment. Mother, I thank you. I was foolishly sensitive.”

“You have no need to fear public opinion, nor has he,” she said, as I left her.

CHAPTER XXII.

A BITTER CUP.

ONE of the places to which I most dreaded going that week was Mrs. Cameron's. It had never been very pleasant for me to go there in my capacity of teacher, and of late I had still more greatly disliked it. Had I consulted my own wishes, I would long since have given up my two pupils there. But I could not do this without making myself the subject of remark. Mrs. Cameron, disagreeable though she undoubtedly was to me, yet possessed, by virtue of her husband's wealth and position, considerable influence in the town. Her two younger children had been among my first pupils, and she had exerted herself to bring me into notice. It had, therefore, been impossible for me, without telling more of the past, which I sincerely desired to forget, than was at all advisable, or than I cared to have known, to refuse my services, unwillingly though they were given, and I concluded I had best "let well enough alone."

My lessons there were scarcely half over before Annie came into the parlor.

"Glad to see you, Sidney. Come, Lou," to her little sister, "you may run away. I want to talk to Miss Elliott."

"But, Annie, the lesson is not half over. What will your mother say?"

"I'll take the responsibility—she won't care. Now,"

as the child, not sorry to be released, left the room, "I've got you at my mercy. Don't blush so, Sidney; I'm only going to return the congratulations you offered me not long since."

"Thank you," I said. "I have been overwhelmed with them of late."

"Then it is really true? Indeed, you have taken us all by surprise."

"Mother!" as at that moment Mrs. Cameron entered, "just to think! I can scarcely believe my own ears!"

Mrs. Cameron came forward to shake hands with me.

"I am glad rumor, for once, told the truth. Miss Sidney, from all accounts, you are doing re-mark-a-bly well. I hear Dr. Ralston is a very nice young man."

"Nice!" Hugh Ralston called "*nice!*" I could not appreciate the compliment, so said nothing.

"A delightful change for you! Though we shall lose your invaluable services, we can only rejoice at your gain. A most delightful change—how you will enjoy it! After having had to work so long for yourself, you will feel like a princess. Not that it made any real difference in your position, Miss Sidney, that you supported yourself; but we all know how you must feel! Ah! you and Annie can sympathize with each other in your parallel positions!"

"How soon are you to be married, Sidney?" Annie broke in on this marvellous speech. "I suppose you have been very busy—have you many pretty things?"

She was in her element now.

"Not many, I fear. I have no great fancy for sewing, and my preparations will be but limited."

"Annie might give you some patterns, Miss Sidney—her things are very stylish. I got all my ideas from Philadelphia."

“Come to my room, Sidney; I would like to show you what I have. More,” as we went along the passages, “than I know what to do with—it will take a lifetime to wear them all out.”

She brought, from bureau and wardrobe, piles and piles for my inspection. I could not but ask what use they would be to her.

“I’ll lay most aside for future use. You know it’s fashionable to have lots of things.”

“Then I fear I’m not very fashionable. I have only necessities, and those but simply made.”

“Oh! but I didn’t make these myself. Some were bought, and we’ve had a seamstress busy for weeks.”

She was searching in her bureau as she spoke.

“See, there is Lewie’s last present to me.”

It was a set of carbuncles, great, glowing stones, heavily set in gold. I did not particularly admire it.

“Was it not kind of dear Lewie?”

“Very—they are quite showy. Don’t you ever call Mr. Perkins Lewis?”

“No, indeed. I like pet names—don’t you?”

“No—I cannot say that I do, for gentlemen. Those abbreviations always sound boyish.”

“I should not know him by any other name. Lewie just suits him. What is Dr. Ralston’s name? I don’t think I ever heard.”

“Hugh,” very laconically.

“Ah, yes, I remember. A name that won’t bear shortening. I understand your dislike of pet names now.”

“It’s real nice to be engaged, is n’t it?” as I rose to go.

“A person has so many more privileges, and it is so convenient to have some one to depend upon!”

Now this was a view I had never taken of the matter ; and as I left Annie, I scarcely knew which to be, most amused or most offended at the morning's interview.

Ah ! well—the world is made up of all kinds of people. It is just as well we don't all think alike.

I was fated to meet everybody I knew that week, and I was very tired of my numerous congratulations. The only pleasant thing about them was that I learned in how high estimation Hugh was held.

Mr. Merton stopped me one afternoon.

“I'm not going to congratulate *you*, Sidney—you've had enough of that, I suppose. But I will say this: that Ralston is a first-rate, noble fellow ; and as I have always looked upon you, somehow, as belonging to me, I shall claim the privilege of giving you away.”

“A privilege I shall only be too happy to grant. You have always been a kind friend to me, Mr. Merton, and as my father is not here, I shall be grateful to you if you will supply his place.”

“That I cannot do, nor any one else ! Poor John ! his daughter's wedding-day would have been a happy day to him ! There is one thing, Sidney : your father would have approved of your choice.”

And all these praises were very sweet to me. I kept them in my heart and brooded over them.

It was an afternoon of surprises to me. Kind as I knew Mr. Merton to be, I had never thought he was as much interested in me as his words this afternoon proved. I was still thinking over them, when I heard my name pronounced in a hesitating way ; and looking up, I saw Will Cameron.

It was the first time, since our last painful interview, that we had done more than exchange a bow. By a sort

of tacit agreement we had avoided each other. I think we both felt we had best not come in contact.

He was looking badly—pale and worn—as I noticed after my momentary embarrassment was over. We walked on, side by side, and I inquired about his health.

“It is only hard work—nothing more. I am become a hard student—a very book-worm, Miss Sidney. You inoculated me with some of your ambition.”

“I am glad to hear of my one good deed,” I said, gayly. “I hear of you occasionally, Mr. Cameron; people say you will be a dignitary in Fairfield some of these days.”

“My present life is very different from what it used to be.”

“But you are happier. My own experience tells me that occupation brings, if not happiness, at least content.”

“I have not found it so,” rather bitterly. “It might have been, had you so chosen, all I could ask. No,” as I hurried my steps, unwilling to hear more, “I am not going to harass you or lose my own self-respect in worse than useless regrets. I see it all now, as I might have seen long ago, had I only chosen to see. I don’t wonder at you, Sidney—I have a thorough respect for Dr. Ralston, slightly though I know him—he will make you happier than I ever could have done. You have chosen well and wisely.”

“As I hope you will, ere long,” I said, more moved than I cared to show. “I hope soon to be able to congratulate you.”

“When I find another Sidney Elliott,” he said, more gayly.

“Somebody better than I am. I won’t ask you to

come and see me now, Mr. Cameron, but after a while I shall be glad to see you."

"A privilege I shall not be slow to avail myself of. I suppose you know I am to have a brother-in-law?"

"Yes — Annie seems very happy."

"I don't like the match particularly. But Annie sees no faults in her intended."

"Love is proverbially blind," I said, glad to change our conversation.

"I think she has rose-colored spectacles on in this case."

I thought so myself, but I preferred to say nothing. It was no business of mine, and if the lady was satisfied, what mattered it? There is a queer old story that pairs, like cheeses, are cut in half, and rolled down hill in one confused mass, to come together as best they may. Sometimes the right ones come together again — more frequently, the reverse. And if Annie Cameron thought she had found in Lewis Perkins her corresponding half-cheese, of which, in his rotund solidity, he was no very unfit representative, they would probably roll along through life as comfortably as most couples.

I was not sorry, on the whole, for my brief talk with Mr. Cameron. It had been rather embarrassing, not a little awkward, but I hoped and thought we would now be friends. In spite of his lack of firmness, there were in him the germs of a noble character, which I hoped would now develop itself. I had forgiven him the pain he had once caused me. If I thought at all about the past, it was rather with a feeling of gratitude to him than with regret. My present happiness more than compensated me for all the past.

Saturday came, the only day of the week I could call

my own ; for even Sunday, a day of rest to most, was far from meriting that title for me, owing to my position as organist.

The early mail brought me a letter from Hugh. It was not my usual day for hearing from him, and I hastily opened it. He wrote in low spirits.

His business, he said, seemed to grow more complicated daily. New claims, new disputes arose, hydra-headed, every day. He was no nearer the termination than when he went there.

“It drags along very slowly — more slowly, I sometimes think, because I am so anxious for it all to end. I fear I shall be detained here longer than I had anticipated. The lawyers say, till the middle of January. I hope these are only croakings. If you were with me, I should not care so much for the detention, which, under the circumstances, is particularly irksome.”

It was no good news to me, either.

The day was one of those oppressive days in November, when, though it is not so very cold, the air is yet raw and chilly, and the wind goes sighing mournfully along our streets, sweeping around the corners ; and though it does not rain, there is a mist in the air, through which the sun, far to the south, gleams at intervals like a fiery ball — a day I hated, a day which depressed and irritated me, weighing upon me like an incubus. I wandered restlessly through the house, unable to settle to anything. Hugh's letter had partly aided in unnerving me ; and after our early dinner, instead of, as my mother advised, going out for a walk, I went to my desk for the purpose of writing to Hugh.

I forgot my low spirits in the pleasure of my intercourse, one-sided though it was, with my absent friend.

Pen and ink are wonderful alleviations of the pains of separation.

I wrote on for some time freely, as was my wont, for my letters to him were nearly a diary of my daily life, when my mother called me.

“I am sorry to interrupt you, Sidney, for I know how you hate to lay aside your pen. It cannot be helped just now: Hugh must wait for his letter. Meta Gray is in the parlor, and wishes to see you.”

My wishes would have prompted me to excuse myself: very unwillingly I laid aside my pen, and went to meet my visitor.

She was standing near the fire, gazing earnestly into its ruddy depths. She was very handsomely, indeed elegantly dressed. A rich black silk, soft, lustreless and unrustling, fell in graceful folds around her. Meta's dresses always reminded me of drapery, like that of an antique statue; a velvet cloak, soft, filmy laces at her throat and wrists, a little hat, shaded with a drooping green feather; at her throat and pendent from her small, shell-like ears, a set of jewels, emeralds and opals, in a light setting of dead gold — priceless stones, whose glitter in the firelight reminded me of the eyes of the wearer. I had never seen her more handsomely attired. She was very pale, I noticed; all her lovely color was gone, and I thought there was a wistful look, almost amounting to sadness, in her marvellous eyes.

We talked of indifferent subjects, in which I know neither of us felt the slightest interest. Then there came a brief silence, which Meta broke:

“I have seen but little of you, of late, Sidney. Whose fault has it been? Not mine, surely.”

“I am growing used to that accusation,” I replied,

carelessly. "I hear it on all sides, Meta; I have but little time for visiting now."

"So I heard. Report says, Sidney, that you have found your Chevalier Bayard at last."

"You have not forgotten that old conversation, I see."

"*I never forget,*" with a sidelong glance at me.

"And, of course, you are very happy. Come, tell me all about it."

"There is very little to tell," I said, a little nettled at her slightly sarcastic tone. "I am engaged to Hugh Ralston, and we are to be married when he returns to Fairfield. I am not ashamed to tell it."

"I had heard it. I wished to hear it from your own lips. Sidney, do you want me to congratulate you?"

Something, what I cannot say, made me look up. She was watching me, as I have seen a child watch the quivering struggles of an insect he had crushed, and which was not wholly dead.

"I see! You are proud of your 'blameless, fearless knight.' What would you say, could I prove to you he is not all you think him? Fearless, he may be — blameless, never!"

"Meta! how dare you?" I faltered. "Hugh Ralston is the soul of honor. I will not listen to a word against him."

"You *shall* listen to me, Sidney. Girl! I only speak for your own good! I would save you from sorrow — from bitter regret. At the risk of losing your friendship, precious as it is to me, I will speak: I will prove myself a true friend. Shall I go on?"

"Yes!"

"You think your lover honorable, true! You have heard of 'whited sepulchres!' such a one is Hugh Ral-

ston. He has won you, raised hopes he never means to fulfil; for, Sidney, all this time he is engaged to another — pledged, in the most solemn way."

"It is false — false!" I interrupted her. "A vile slander!"

"I wish it were, for your sake," almost tenderly. "But have you ever heard him speak of me, Sidney? — ever heard him speak of our past? You know we met before: have you never wondered on what terms we stood? I tell you now, Sidney — promised husband and wife!"

"Meta! you are surely jesting! If so, tell me at once. This is too painful a jest for me!"

"I wish I could! Cannot you believe my solemn word? Have I ever, in any way, in my intercourse with you, deviated from the truth?"

She had not, as I was compelled to confess; and painfully I began to think her words might be true. Could this be the tie between them which had so perplexed me when Dr. Ralston first came among us? This would explain it, and those mysterious walks I had once or twice met them taking together!

"Can you give me any proof of this, Meta?" I said, hoarsely. "I do not like to doubt your word — but —"

"I can," very slowly. "These jewels, in their strange setting, were his first present to me — old family jewels, belonging to his mother. See," laying one of the earrings in my hand.

On the reverse of the gold was engraved, in tiny letters, "Mary Gordon," his mother's maiden name, as I too well knew.

"That is not sufficient," I said, after examining the jewel. "I need some stronger proof."

“That, too, I can give — or shall I leave you in your blindness? No! Then you, yourself, shall supply the necessary facts.”

“You had a letter from Hugh this morning?” I assented. “One you did not expect—one in which he told you he would be delayed! Shall I tell you the time he fixed for his return?—the middle of January.”

She laid her hand on mine. I shrank from her.

“This you might have learned by accident,” I said, as I thought my mother might possibly have mentioned these two facts to her. “I need something more palpable than this.”

“Not satisfied yet? You are hard to convince. Yet, I know I can do it.”

She drew a letter from her pocket, which she handed me. It bore her name, in Hugh’s resolute, firm hand—it bore the post-mark of the town where he now was, and, with a low cry, I pushed it from me, burying my face in my hands. I was at last convinced!

She bent over me, caressingly. I sprang to my feet.

“Will you marry him now, Meta Gray?”

A soft, rosy flush, like that of the early morning, rushed over her face. Her lips slowly formed the words—“I love him!” There was no mistaking the accent—it was that of truth.

“You are welcome to him, then,” all my pride coming to my aid. “You have proved yourself a true friend, Meta: I should thank you for it. Later, perhaps, I will—now, go! Go!—I feel as if I never wished to look upon your face again!”

We stood, the conqueror and the conquered, gazing at each other. Her eyes fell under my steady look, and at last, with a slow, gliding motion, she noiselessly turned and left the room.

And, scarcely knowing what I did, crushed to the ground, sick at heart, I crept to my room. I only wanted to be alone—in solitude to fight this horror which had come into my life, darkening all my fair prospects, blighting my very existence!

My mother came to my door at tea-time.

“I do not wish any,” as calmly as I could. “My head feels wretchedly, mother. I hope a good night’s rest will cure it.”

A *good* night! Oh! mockery of words—it was a night of horror—a night of bitter distress!

I remember it now, as we remember agonizing pain, with a prayer we may never again be called to pass through it. Confidence betrayed, affection misplaced—is there any more bitter trial? The words I had that day heard haunted me. I could not forget them.

I cannot dwell on that night—my recollection of it is but a confused one of acute suffering. I never undressed—I threw myself on my face across my bed, and there, in sleeplessness, in misery, those long, weary hours passed.

I rose in the morning to see my unfinished letter to Hugh lying, as I had left it, on my open desk. I shivered as I gazed at it! Then, with a sudden impulse, I seized the closely-written sheets, thrust them into the grate, and they were soon reduced to ashes. My own written love-words should not mock me—shadows of a false happiness!

How I got through that Sunday I do not know. I went about uncomplainingly—and I know my mother thought my heavy eyes, my pale cheeks, were but the natural consequence of my headache of the preceding evening, to which she knew I was subject.

I went to church, scarce knowing what I did. Mechanically I followed the services, rising and kneeling in the proper places; but the voice of the minister was as a dull, undistinguished sound in my ears. I did not even know what members of the choir were present. Yet they told me, afterward, that I had never played as well. I do not remember it; yet, in the closing voluntary, the whole congregation, with one accord, stopped to listen, and not one left the church till the last pealing note had died away under my trembling fingers.

CHAPTER XXIII.

NEW POWERS.

THERE was but one idea in my mind on the morning following that dreary Sabbath-day. It was — that my mother must be told of the blight which had come over my life. How was I to do it? The opportunity came sooner than I had anticipated.

“Another letter for you, Sidney,” as I took my seat at the table. “I hope it contains better news than the last you received.”

My hand trembled as I laid the letter by my plate. There it lay, and I sat staring at the familiar handwriting, my heart cold within me as a lump of ice.

“Don’t you intend to read it? Come, I am nearly as much interested in Hugh’s movements as you are yourself.”

“Read it?” I echoed. “No, mother!” summoning all my courage. “Never — nor anything else that comes from his hand. I may as well tell you the truth, bitter though it is. False, dishonorable as he has proved, our engagement is at an end.”

“Sidney! you are dreaming! Hugh Ralston false and dishonorable? I cannot believe it of him.”

I laughed — a bitter, mocking laugh.

“I, too, believed in his truth. I, too, trusted in his honor. An empty faith — a broken trust.”

And, kneeling by her side, my head resting on her

bosom, I told, as well as I could, of my interview with Meta.

“Do you wonder now, mother,” as I finished my painful story, “knowing what I do? There is but one course left for me—to cast him off!”

“Will you not ask him for an explanation? Circumstances are strong against him.”

“*Never!*” I interrupted. “No explanation he could offer would be satisfactory; I wish to hear nothing that he can say. What! throw myself at his feet, to have myself trampled upon? Mother—I have some pride left.”

“But it may be false.”

“I cannot doubt the evidence of my own senses. And now, mother, if you love me, let us drop this subject. I never wish to hear *his* name again—never wish any reference made to the past. I would not give him the satisfaction of thinking he could pain me. Only, mother,” my voice trembling at last, “you must love me better now—I have only you left me!”

We never mentioned the matter again.

Before I went to my pupils that day, I sought my room. I drew from my finger, where *he* had placed it, the ring—emblem of so many sweet hopes. I gathered together all the letters I had received; his picture, and last, the epistle I had that morning received—unopened and unread—I added to the package. Then, selecting my best pen, my finest paper, I sat down to my desk, and in a firm, untrembling hand, I wrote the following lines:

“After what has passed, you cannot be surprised that I withdraw from my engagement. I ask, I offer no explanation; I make no reproaches—either would be thrown away.”

Then, folding these relics carefully together, I directed them, in a clear, legible manner, and, passing the post-office, I dropped them into the box.

It was as well for me I had to teach that day; but my self-appointed task was not yet over.

That evening I gathered together every article which had been made in preparation for my approaching marriage. I laid them carefully in the rose-scented drawers—even now, the smell of those damask roses has something funereal about it to me—almost wishing they were my grave-clothes! I never wished to see them again. I locked the drawers, one by one, and, taking the key to my mother, I gave it to her. “Keep it,” I said to her, “where I never can see it. I shall never ask you for it again.”

Two or three more letters came to me, one after the other. Not one of them did I open, they were all sent back unread.

I do not know how I should have lived through those days, if it had not been for my mother’s thoughtful kindness. It never failed. Her silent sympathy—for though, in compliance with my request, it never expressed itself in words—yet showed itself in a thousand ways. Her soft kiss on my cheek, her gentle hand smoothing my hair, the many kind offices of affection, were most soothing to me.

I do not like to dwell upon those days. Writing of them now, after the lapse of years, some of the old pain comes back. It was as though a crushing weight had fallen on me, or as though a bright summer’s day had been suddenly clouded. My love for Hugh Ralston had become so much a part of my very self, that to cast it away was like tearing away my very life.

How I felt I cannot tell—nor would I, if I could. Mrs. Browning's "De Profundis"—that sad utterance of a sorrowing heart—was the very rendering of my feelings. That part of my life was a separate existence—it did not seem to belong to me. I had known suffering before—but what was it in comparison with this? Utter nothingness.

Not for one moment did I attach any blame to Meta. Though she was, as it were, to come between me and all that could render life dear, I could not blame her. She had proved herself, I thought, a friend; and though I had driven her from my presence, I felt deeply grateful to her. My pride forbade my acknowledging this—as it did the declaration of my changed position. If Meta chose to announce her engagement, she might; my lips were sealed—and even as they were sealed, I would have sealed up my past. I would have buried it away from all resuscitation, as in Jean Ingelow's "Dead Year." I would

"Let the dark for evermore
Close thee when I close the door;
And the dust for ages fall
In the creases of thy pall;
And no voice nor visit rude
Break thy seal'd solitude."

I dared not dwell upon the past—with the pale ghosts of "what might have been" haunting it. Still less would I dwell upon the future—its brilliant promises were all clouded to me. Only the present was left—and oh! what a dull blank that was. Life was a burden, nothing interested me; had it not been for my mother I would gladly have died. But life and youth were too strong within me for that.

I have said that nothing interested me. It was not so ; there was one thing in which I did take some little interest, because it made me forget, for the time, my own sufferings.

Looking through my desk, that Monday, in searching for the letters I had desired to return, I had found the forgotten manuscript of my story. I had then carelessly pushed it aside. Later, I took it up, to occupy my thoughts, and with some vague hope that I might find in Fame, could I but win it, the peace I had failed to win from Love.

It was but a selfish life, as I now think, that I then led. I lived wholly in myself, with no thought for others. I avoided all companionship, save that which was forced upon me.

The days passed rapidly enough. As once before, I found in occupation my best cure. I had now more pupils than ever : they filled my days.

The evenings were the worst. My mother had tried to interest me in our old amusements, reading and conversation, but I liked neither. My pen was my only consolation, and to it I devoted all my spare hours. I believe that it, and it alone, saved me from going crazy. In the imaginary troubles of my heroine, I forgot my own. My wakeful hours at night were spent in composition ; my leisure hours by day were given to writing.

My story was but a simple one — that of a woman's life and trials — an autobiography. I thought that was least difficult. Mad. de Stael says that novel-writing is the easiest branch of literature. I do not agree with her. It is no easy thing to write a good novel. We can only paint life as we see it, not as it is. We see the result, not the moving springs ; and how do we know what influ-

ences are at work under the actions we most praise or condemn?

I could not but think of Hugh's words to me, as my book progressed, about women being too apt to make their writings but the reflection of themselves. Over and over again I found myself putting in my heroine's mouth my own words—attributing to her my own sentiments; making her act as I would have done under similar circumstances. This would not do. The public should not see me in my own creation—should not know me as I was; and whenever I saw the “*I*” apparent in what I had written, that part was destroyed and carefully rewritten. And there was not one word of any foreign language in the book. I was determined that no one should accuse me of borrowing words from a strange tongue wherewith to conceal my paucity of ideas.

Only those who themselves have written will understand the fascination which this, my first effort with the pen, exercised over me. I wrote till my temples throbbed and my face burned, and my weary fingers and aching wrist refused to obey my bidding. I grew pale and thin. I saw my mother often look at me anxiously, as though she would have me rest; but she said nothing. It would have been useless. Yet, at times, I was almost tempted to commit the whole thing to the flames. What I had written, after the fever of composition was over, fell so far short of what I intended it to be—my ideas, when imprisoned in ink and paper, seemed so trivial, that I was discouraged. This dissatisfaction with my own efforts was, though I little guessed it then, the surest proof of my improvement, and, in spite of it all, I persevered.

It was finished at last. I well remember the day my cramped and tired fingers wrote the last words, and added

the last page to the pile of manuscript. It was like parting from a friend.

I was thankful, in those dreary days, that I had no sisters. Between them, as a general rule, I had seen little or no sympathy. I had been too much behind the scenes in my teaching. There, I had seen sisters, gentle and loving enough in public, full of bitter and unkind feelings. I had seen how the spirit of teasing had imbittered lives and saddened hearts; how, under its blighting influences, demon as it is, coldness and dissension had grown up in families; how it had wounded the sensitive, and, playing, as it did, upon the tenderest chords, had destroyed love and confidence, to raise in their place dislike and suspicion. If I had had this trial, petty in appearance, fearful in reality, as all those who have passed through it can bear witness, in addition to my others, I dare not think what the consequences might have been!

But I had no fear of this from my mother. She was too gentle, too much of a lady to tease. And secure of her sympathy, I, wishing for some one's opinion of my story, went to her, my best, dearest friend, as a mother ever should be to her daughter.

Half proud, half ashamed, one wintry night late in December, I read what I had written to her. The hours passed, interrupted only by my low voice, as I sat at her feet, or by the rustling of the leaves, as, one by one, I turned them over.

I read it all, and, laying aside the last page, I silently raised my eyes to her face, waiting for her verdict. Not a word had she spoken during the reading, and now I waited almost breathlessly for her to speak.

But I do not intend to record her words. A mother's praise! what can be sweeter to a daughter's ear? Enough

to say, that with her full, unqualified consent, the volume was next day forwarded to one of the leading publishing houses in Philadelphia, a firm whose kind, gentlemanly treatment of all who have dealings with them has won them an enviable reputation. This done, I could only wait.

In all these weeks Hugh Ralston's name had never once been mentioned between us. He had, as it were, passed entirely out of our lives. Yet he was not forgotten. I know my mother still had faith in him, that she still thought him honorable, true; that at one word from me, she would have written to him, to ask him to clear himself from the charges which to me seemed unanswerable. But his name never once passed her lips—and oh! how I thanked her for it.

In all I have written, frequently as my mother's name appears, I know, I feel I have not done justice to her character. A good, true-hearted, pure-minded woman, a tender mother, a humble, consistent Christian, her thorough unselfishness, her delicacy and refinement were felt and appreciated by all who knew her, and by none more than myself. Different as we were—for, though I was the more resolute, the more determined of the two, and though she was by far the superior—I fairly idolized her. I felt for her not only the love and confidence she merited as my mother, but there existed a warm friendship between us.

She was not sorry that I had laid aside my pen. I, on the contrary, regretted it. I missed its constant companionship, the occupation it had given to my thoughts. It had enabled me to control myself, had produced an almost unnatural calmness; and now that this stimulus was removed, I was to pay the penalty.

My brain, my powers of self-control, had been too severely tried, and Nature would revenge herself for the force I had laid upon them. The headache, to which I had been always subject, returned at more frequent intervals; I could not sleep, and my restless nights were followed by listless days, when I could scarcely perform my duties: and as long as I was able I bore up—but it was not for long.

Christmas came, that day whose coming I had dreaded, for I feared the thoughts it would bring—the memories of blighted hopes! I need not have feared it, for when that day dawned I was unconscious of its coming. My mother, entering my room at an early hour to call me, found me lying in a burning fever, unconscious of my surroundings. Nature, too severely tried, had given way at last. The long struggle was over—my powers of endurance had failed.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SICKNESS AND RESIGNATION.

OF the weeks which followed I have no distinct recollection. A few faint ideas, like half-forgotten dreams, I can recall; but these memories are too misty and undecided for me to depend upon them.

For days, the fever, consuming me, preying upon me, ran high. It was accompanied with delirium, in which I lived over, unconsciously to myself, all the past year. Intervals would come when I lay quiet, to all appearance, yet a word would bring back all my old ravings.

To my mother's tender, untiring care, through that long, wearisome illness, I owe the preservation of my life. For my time was not yet come; youth and a strong constitution were on my side. The delirium left me, the burning fever subsided, and I lay pale and feeble—so nervous I started at the slightest sound—too weak even to think—careless whether I lived or died.

I knew—how, I know not—yet I knew it, that Hugh Ralston had returned to Fairfield. I knew, too, or rather I had one day felt, that he had been under our roof. It was during one of my calmer intervals, and my mother had been called away for a moment from my bedside. She left the door open, so that she might be recalled immediately. Ralston was there, awaiting her in the hall. His voice, subdued though it was, reached my ears, sensitively alive to the slightest sound; and ere he and my

mother could exchange more than a word, she was called back to me. My delirium had returned with tenfold fury.

Dr. Kennedy was my physician, and no one could have been kinder or more considerate. People wondered why he was employed instead of Hugh; why the latter, since his return, had been boarding at one of the hotels, instead of returning to his old quarters with us. They did not know his name was never mentioned in my hearing.

Once, indeed, it was — and with effects similar to those the sound of his voice had produced. I had been lying, motionless, for hours, without a word passing my lips, when Dr. Kennedy came to make his usual visit.

“She is no better to-day, Mrs. Elliott. I see no change either way. I wish you would let me call Ralston in; it would be a satisfaction to myself.”

But the name — *his* name, to which my senses, sealed as they seemed to all external objects, were yet alive — was enough. Another fit of delirium ensued, lasting for hours. Dr. Kennedy, frightened at the effect of his suggestion, never repeated it.

The springs of life, however, were yet strong within me. When even the sanguine physician began to think my case was hopeless, when my mother began to think she would be called upon to resign me, the scale, quivering for so long between life and death, began to turn. Slowly, but surely, the fever abated — the light of reason came back. I was better; but my illness left me painfully weak, nervous, and listless.

“I can do nothing more for her, Mrs. Elliott,” good Dr. Kennedy said one day to my mother. “What she needs now is to be roused — her recovery depends now

upon herself. Her illness now is more mental than physical" — more clear-sighted than most medical men — "and if you can remove the weight on her mind, interest her in something, she will get well fast enough."

My poor mother! She knew well enough what it was that lay, a dead weight, on my heart!

It must have been very hard for her. I was listless, and unable or unwilling to make the slightest exertion. I would not even have thought, could I have avoided that. I depended on my mother for everything; and she, in her tender pity for me, never once reminded me of my selfishness, for such it was.

I used to sit, after I was able to leave my bed, in a large invalid-chair, saying nothing, noticing nothing—in a sort of dull apathy, from which my mother vainly endeavored, by every means which lay in her power, to rouse me. One day, hoping she had at last found something I would care for, she brought me my book, published at last, and with it various newspaper notices and letters.

My book had been a success—not only to the publishers, but it had brought me considerable pecuniary profit. It was as well, for else I do not know how we should have borne the expenses attendant upon my illness. I carelessly turned over the fair pages, beautiful specimens of the printer's art; but I did not linger over them: I took up the notices of the papers sent me by the publishers.

They all spoke favorably of my maiden effort. "A first attempt," one of them said, "it undoubtedly was; yet, an attempt which promised well for the future. There were faults, but the writer would improve; and did the future but fulfil the promise of the present, one day

the author might hope to take a distinguished place in American literature."

Then, instead of "damning with faint praise," my kind critic went on to point out the errors, "errors peculiar to young writers," and warning me how to avoid them. Where he could give praise, he gave it freely; where blame was needed, he did not withhold it.

I read it over carefully, feeling its justice; but I did not linger over it. Even less attention did I bestow upon my letters — one from my publishers, congratulating me upon my success, and offering their services in future — a second, from a well-known firm in New York, desiring me to mention my own terms for a second volume from my pen. I had waked up to "find myself famous."

But what did I care for my laurels? Just now, they seemed valueless. In the past, which now seemed ages removed, I might have prized them; now, they were but emptiness.

My mother had hoped this would supply the needed stimulus — in vain. I relapsed into my former listless state.

Yet, day by day I gained strength. My friends were allowed to visit me, and they were kind in coming. From them I heard of the doings of the winter. Annie Cameron's wedding had been followed by a number of parties: there had been the usual changes — births, deaths, and marriages.

It was all one to me. I cared nothing for the external world — not even the familiar names interested me. Only one thing I did notice: that among all my visitors, not one ever mentioned Meta Gray's name. Not that the omission troubled me, nor did I ask any questions; it was a matter of perfect indifference to me whether they spoke

of her or not, only I sometimes wondered if she were married, and they feared to tell me of it. As I was then, it would have been no shock to me.

But a day was coming when I was to be aroused — when feeling and hope, which I had thought dead within me, were to arise from the ashes where, unknown to myself, they lay smouldering, and re-assert their supremacy. A day which was for me the beginning of a new life, which opened to me the portals of a new world: and yet its threshold was — a grave!

It was the first day I had even exerted myself so far as to walk across my room to the window. Not that I had not before been strong enough for this, but I had been content to sit over the fire, like an old woman. To-day, the first time for more than three months, I looked again upon the face of Nature.

She wore a very different aspect now from that she had presented, when, on Christmas eve, I had last looked upon her. Then, the hills lay white and cold; the river was one unbroken sheet of ice, on which moved the merry skaters; the trees showed their branches in bare tracery against a wintry sky, hanging with icicles; the sky was of that frosty clearness which only belongs to a winter's day; the air, though calm, was yet cold; all lay in the firm, still embrace of the Ice King.

Now, how changed! The hills wore already a pale green. The trees began to unfold their leaves, promise of the summer's foliage; the river, freed from its icy bonds, flashed and sparkled its waves in the early April sunlight; here and there, through the garden, a few hardy flowers were in bloom, and already the birds had returned from the South. The winter was over; spring,

with all her beauty, a beauty renewed every year, never perishing, had returned to our land.

It was not till I saw how the time I had spent in my room had, by slow degrees, left its traces on the earth, that I really understood how long I had been sick. And as this came over me, I felt, for the first time, that I, too, once more must be "up and doing." I must resume the burden of labor, which for a while had slipped from my shoulders. Most unwillingly I faced this truth; most sadly I felt that I had all my work to recommence—not as once before, in youth and hope, light-hearted and courageous; but as a saddened, weary woman!

For I was tired of my life, unwilling to receive the health and strength which mercifully had been restored to me. Because one blessing, the chief of all blessings, the sacred gift of love, had been denied me—me, who would have so prized, so valued it—I could not see the many others that had fallen to my lot. For even in the thorniest, stoniest path, we may gather flowers, do we but seek for them—even in the loneliest life there may be happiness. All may win some love, though it may not be the crowning love. And though I might be denied my throne, my heritage, in the kingdom over which we women reign—the heart of man; though never I might claim the realm of home, mine might yet be a noble life. I might bind round my brow, if I so willed it, the laurel-wreath of fame. I might find, in the applause of the world, a substitute for the dearer, sweeter praises of a lover's lips: denied what I most craved, I would try to accept gratefully what lay within my reach.

Yet all this time I knew that my love for Hugh Ralston would never die. Through evil report, through good report, it would cling to him—only dying with my death!

My heart, once given to him, was given forever; and knowing this, I vowed, then and there, that never would I carry to any man's fireside an unwilling heart—never give my hand, pledge of a divided duty. Better to pass alone through life. I would always find something for my hands to do, without binding myself to that living slavery, a loveless marriage.

One year ago, Will Cameron, had he so willed, might have won me. Then I had not sounded the depths of my own nature—had not discovered as yet what my true self was. Now, I stood resigned to my lot, whatever it might be; and such resignation is a sort of heroism. It takes courage such as few men possess, and few women get credit for, to look facts unshrinkingly in the face, and to nerve ourselves, none the less bravely because tremblingly, to meet them.

So my fate, as I thought, was fixed. I was unworthy of the happiness which so brief a time before had seemed within my reach only to escape me; and I whispered to myself, as this thought came over me, a verse of that sweetest, saddest of all love-songs:

“I was not half worthy of you, Douglas;
Not half worthy the like of you!
Now, all men besides are to me like shadows:
I love you, Douglas, tender and true.”

But my Douglas had not proved himself true. I could only apply the unworthiness to myself.

Absorbed as I was, I did not hear the door open, nor the step that crossed the floor. Not till a hand was lightly laid on my shoulder did I turn, to receive Mrs. Merton's affectionate kiss.

“Sidney, my poor child! how you are changed! I should scarcely have known you!”

My mother, who had come in with her, smiled.

“You should have seen her three weeks ago. She is looking almost like herself *now*.”

“She is not the bright, rosy girl I congratulated on her appearance a few months since. We must build her up again as fast as we can.”

“It will do her no good to stand so long,” my mother said, making me sit down, which I was glad to do, for I was still weak, and in my revery I had forgotten how long I had stood by the window.

“You must have thought it strange, Sidney,” Mrs. Merton went on, after a pause, “that through all your sickness I have not been here; nor since your convalescence. I could not help it.”

Now that she spoke of it, I remembered that among my visitors I had not seen her; but I had not, till now, given it a thought.

“I have been kept at home by very painful circumstances, and nothing would have brought me out to-day, had I not wished to see you.” She looked, questioningly, at my mother.

“You may as well tell her the truth,” the latter said, in reply to Mrs. Merton’s look. “I think she can bear it, and she will have to hear it before long.”

“You have not asked after Meta, Sidney,” my friend began, in a hesitating manner. “You and she were friends: have you no questions to ask me about her?”

“No!” I said, coldly. “I wish to hear nothing concerning her,” and I turned restlessly away.

“Child! child! will you speak so, when I tell you she is—dying?”

Dying! Meta Gray dying! She, with all her youth, beauty, wealth; with all her golden store of affection for

which I so thirsted ; with all to make life precious to her, dying ! And I, weary, sad-hearted, to whom the quiet grave would have been a welcome resting-place, to be left ! It was a strange ordering.

I could not speak for a moment ; and when I did, it was to ask, in faltering tones, how this had occurred.

“Very simply,” was the reply. “She had been bridesmaid for Annie Cameron, whose wedding had been followed by a number of parties. Meta, returning from one of these on a bitterly cold night, had taken cold. She neglected it, thinking it would pass away ; but instead of that, it settled on her lungs. Her mother died of consumption, which probably rendered her liable to the disease ; for one day, in a violent fit of coughing, she broke a blood-vessel, and since then has never left her bed.”

I listened, deeply moved. Was this to be the end of that young, bright life ?

“Since that day,” she continued, “I have never left her. Nor would I have done it to-day, save at her own earnest request. Sidney, Meta craves your presence ; she bids me say to you that she must see you. She is restless and uneasy ; will you not soothe her by returning home with me ?”

Nothing that I could have been asked to do could have been more repugnant to my feelings. To see my rival, dying though she might be—the very thought brought back the agony of pain which our last interview had caused me, and I shrank from its renewal.

“Go with Mrs. Merton, dear,” my mother, reading my thoughts, gently said. “I do not think you will regret it.”

But I could not bear the thought. Every excuse I could think of I brought forward ; they were all set aside.

"I cannot walk so far," I said at last. "I have not yet been even down stairs."

"Poor child! we would not ask it of you. The carriage is at the door, and the air to-day is so soft and warm that the ride will do you good."

So, almost in spite of myself, I was carefully wrapped up, taken down stairs, and placed in the carriage. As I leaned back on the soft cushions, a little exhausted by the excitement and the unusual exertion, I heard my mother whisper hurriedly to Mrs. Merton, as the latter prepared to enter the carriage:

"Shall you tell her anything, Mary?"

"No," very decidedly. "Let Meta tell her own story—it will come with a far better grace from her lips than from mine."

There was no time for more. The carriage rolled easily away, and I thought no more of the words I had overheard. Mrs. Merton was very silent during our short drive, which I enjoyed; for after my long confinement to the house, the sweet, soft, spring air was most grateful to me, and, sooner than I wished, we reached our destination.

Mrs. Merton almost lifted me out of the carriage. Taking me to the parlor, warm and cheerful, she carefully removed my wrappings, and after making me sit down and drink a glass of wine, she left me for a moment to prepare Meta for the interview. I was glad of the brief solitude, for it gave me time to compose myself.

It was not without curiosity that I looked forward to the meeting. What could Meta have to say to me? I puzzled my brain in vain; my wildest imaginings were to fall far short of the reality.

There was the stillness through the house that a dangerous sickness always produces—a stillness almost painfully oppressive. I had barely time to notice this change in the usually cheerful, noisy house, when Mrs. Merton returned.

“Meta is ready and anxious to see you, Sidney. But before I take you to her I must warn you, whatever she may say to you, and you have much to learn, to avoid all excitement. You are neither of you strong enough to bear it; she still less than yourself—for remember, her life hangs on a thread. The wish to see you is all that has kept her up for days.”

And with this parting caution she led me to Meta's chamber, the door of which she opened. I stood a moment on the threshold. Then, as calmly as I could, I entered the sick-room, at this last moment doubting my own strength. I was alone; Mrs. Merton, on leaving me, had, however, whispered, “I shall be within call, if you need me.”

CHAPTER XXV.

META'S STORY.

WAS it possible that this was Meta Gray who lay before me—she whom I remembered the very impersonation of youth and beauty—that pale, emaciated woman, whose frail form, frailer even than my own, I now beheld? Much as the past months had changed me, the change they had wrought in her was still greater.

Her long, beautiful hair, always reminding me of imprisoned sunbeams in its golden luxuriance, had been cut off, and now lay in short, soft curls, like those of a child, on her pale, blue-veined temples. Her large eyes, larger than ever in her excessive thinness, had a troubled, restless look; her cheeks, sunken as they were, wore a hectic flush; and the hand she silently extended to me, weak as I was, I could have crushed in my grasp. Still, she was very beautiful; but oh! such a wreck of what she once had been!

“This is kind of you, Sidney,” she said, in a voice whose low, hoarse tones contrasted strangely with their former melody. “If it had been possible, I would have gone to you—more fitting, if I could; for I have much to say to you.”

“I am sorry to see you lying here, Meta,” I said, sincerely.

"I am not! It is far better as it is. But you, Sidney, you, too, have been ill — ill and suffering, and I am responsible for it all!

"I have a long story to tell you, Sidney, and not much time to tell it in; but it must be done, no matter how unwillingly. How you will regard me, when you know all, I cannot say; but I cannot die without striving to undo, so far as lies in my power, the evil I have caused.

"I am almost afraid to begin," she went on, slowly; "indeed, I scarcely know what first to say. So much wrong, so much deception, that it will be hard to unravel the twisted threads. Do you remember our last meeting, and its consequences?"

Ah! I only too well remembered them.

"We will not speak of that," I said, gently, pitying her too visible agitation. "What is past is past, and cannot now be recalled."

"But I wish to recall it—nay, I must! I will come to that in proper time. No, you must not interrupt me; this wretched, racking cough will stop me often enough as it is.

"I must go back years—years before I met you—to begin my story. When I was only eighteen, just from school, I was boarding with an aunt in Philadelphia. I was very gay, very much admired, and I enjoyed the life I led.

"Did you ever hear Hugh Ralston speak of his elder brother? No? The two were attending lectures in the city—they had both chosen the same profession—when I met them. Walter was handsome, far handsomer than his brother: he had ability, would one day be wealthy—in a word, his prospects were very bright, when, on an evil day for us both, we met.

“He fell in love with me, desperately, madly. I was flattered by his preference, for he was the best of my already numerous admirers; and, pleased at the thought of winning him, of prevailing over the crowd of young ladies who admired him; my pride and vanity gratified at the idea of making such a brilliant marriage as this promised to be, for I did not love him, I engaged myself to him.

“Well, for a time, it all went on smoothly enough. Walter was all devotion, obedient to my slightest whim, and I was very exacting. I don’t think he ever dreamed I did not reciprocate his affection—I was a good actress even then. He loaded me with presents. Nothing that he could lay at my feet or offer to my acceptance was withheld. If gifts could have bought love, he would have secured mine.

“I had heard Walter speak of his brother, but, strangely enough, we had never met. Hugh was very studious, not fond of visiting, and I was a little surprised, when, one evening, Walter brought him to see me. That very evening, Sidney, I learned that if ever I could love, my love would be given to Hugh Ralston. I told you the solemn truth when I said to you, ‘I love him.’

“I saw him often after that. For Walter’s sake—the brothers were devotedly fond of each other; he treated me as a sister—and I tried hard to win him. I dared not break with Walter, who had become positively hateful to me—I told you I had never loved him—that would have ended my acquaintance with Hugh. I loved him, *passionately*, and I made no effort to overcome the feeling. Walter never suspected me: honorable himself, he believed me equally true, and he knew Hugh.

“Our wedding-day drew near, and I had not yet

gained my end. Hugh sent me, with a kind, brotherly note—I have it still—the emeralds you once saw me wear—his mother's jewels; the most precious ornament, he said, he could give his brother's wife. I sent him a line in reply: I should be alone that evening for an hour before Walter came, and I requested his presence.

“I waited impatiently for evening. He came, and, Sidney, I did what you never would dream possible: I confessed my love—and pleaded, no one knows how wildly, for a return. He listened in silence. I would not let him speak till I had said my say, and then, in a few calm, cold words, he told me it was impossible. He reminded me of my duty to Walter, who at that moment entered the room.

“I was nearly beside myself already, and the sight of him roused me to ungovernable fury. Sidney, I cannot tell you of the rest of that evening! I dare not even think of it! Hugh will fill the blank for you—I *cannot!*

“Well, years passed, and I came to Fairfield. My engagement with Walter was, of course, broken off. My life here you know pretty well. I met you, and I have always loved you. Something drew me towards you; and still, though you were once friendly enough, I never could go beyond a certain point with you. You never fully trusted me; and there always seemed an invisible barrier between us, which you *would* not remove, and I *could* not. Yet every day increased my admiration for your character, so different from my own. I would have given worlds to be like you!

“I am telling you a strange story, Sidney.”

“A sad one,” I said, gently. “But what has this to do with me?”

“I am coming to that now. Don’t look at me so pityingly; I don’t deserve it. You have not heard the worst.

“My old love of admiration still existed. I won Will Cameron’s heart, as you know, only to cast it aside. Then Hugh Ralston came here, and all my old love for him returned.

“I knew, after *that evening*, I never could win him; yet I once more tried my power—in vain. I saw, long before you even suspected it, that you had gained his heart; and I vowed you should never be his wife, if it lay in my power to prevent it!

“I tried my best to prejudice him against you. I called you artful, designing, untruthful—I represented you in the worst light I could. Yet even when I spoke most bitterly against you, I loved you, contradiction though it may seem; and I most deeply felt your superiority. It was all useless: Ralston knew me of old. He could judge for himself; and in spite of all I had done, all I had said, I heard at last of your engagement.

“But even this did not discourage me. Circumstances seemed to aid me; and you know a woman is all-powerful for evil or for good, as she wills it. Sidney, my only excuse for it all, is my passionate, fervent love. You can sympathize with me there, at least.

“If I could not have Hugh’s love, neither should you. But I would try once more to gain it. I told you circumstances favored me. I saw your meeting with Will Cameron: you were both too intent on each other to notice me as I passed you; but I heard him say to you, earnestly, that ‘what he was he owed to you.’

“That was enough! I can scarcely bear to tell you the rest. That very night I wrote to Hugh. I told him

you had deserted him for Will Cameron, had slighted his love, and asked him if I could not make some little amends to him for your falsehood.

“He wrote to me, indignantly accusing *me* of falsehood. He called me unwomanly, unchristian, and told me nothing in the world could shake his faith in you.

“Sidney, that was the letter whose outside I showed you. Over that interview I pass; you have reason to remember it.

“Well! my plans succeeded. My knowledge of your character had greatly aided me. You were suspicious and proud; for the first, a word was sufficient; the second made you a very Spartan at concealment. I knew a word from you would undo all my work; but I knew, too, that word would never be spoken.

“Ah! you may well shrink from me,” for, inexpressibly shocked at what I had heard, I moved away from the bedside. “I know I deserve it—it is not the least part of my punishment; but I will not ask you to forgive me till you have heard the whole.

“I have little more to say. That I am sincerely, deeply repentant, you must know; else, how could I have made this confession? Since my illness I have seen things in their true light—so far as I could, I have made amends. Sidney,” her cold hand on mine, “will you not grant me the forgiveness I so earnestly solicit, I so little deserve, when I tell you that I saw Hugh a few days since—that I told him the story I have told you, and that he has given me the pardon you surely will not refuse?”

I cannot describe the feelings with which I had listened to this singular statement. I could scarcely believe the

evidence of my own senses. Meta watched me earnestly.

“My best plea,” she said, feebly, “lies in the fact that I have restored your happiness. Once more, Sidney, forgive me, for ‘I have loved much!’”

“I do forgive you,” I said at last, with an effort.

“And in your new-found happiness, you will not think too unkindly of me? Hugh has yet much to tell you—much I could not tell. Oh! Sidney, I can die in peace now, for you have forgiven me!”

“Wholly, fully, entirely.”

“You have made me very happy! One thing more. Sidney, bring me, from the drawer of my dressing-table, a little box.”

I went to the drawer designated, where, among flowers, ribbons, laces—feminine adornments Meta would never more need—lay the box she had mentioned, a little Indian casket of beautiful workmanship. I gave it to her. She opened and laid it in my hand. It contained the magnificent emeralds and opals she had worn at our last interview.

“I want you to have them, Sidney; it is but right you should. Hugh Ralston’s wife is entitled to his mother’s jewels! Look on them as his gift—you will soon lose all association of me with them.”

But I had forgotten all my past misery. I did not think now of all I had suffered. I sat, the glittering stones in my hand, only thinking of the sudden gleam of joy which was gilding my future—of the happy home and wedded love of which the jewels were a pledge; and grateful, inexpressibly grateful to Meta, for the change she had wrought in my prospects.

“Ah! I see you have forgiven me fully!” as, with a

sudden impulse, I bent over her and kissed her. "Thank you, Sidney—we are friends once more."

Yes, I had forgotten and forgiven all. Mrs. Merton came in at that moment.

"I told you I would be her best physician, Aunt Mary," Meta said. "Look at her now."

"Yes; but you have been talking too much. Sidney, I must send you home now."

And I was not sorry to obey. I wanted to be alone, to dream over the change the day had brought me. Yet I feared to move, lest I should be dreaming—I doubted if the sudden flash of light was really true.

Meta seemed most unwilling to have me go.

"I will come again," I said, as I bade her good-bye.

"You will not fail?" very eagerly.

"No," I said, "I will see you again before long."

And soothed with this promise, she let me go.

"Poor Meta! I hope she is satisfied now," Mrs. Merton said to me as I took my seat in the carriage. "It has been a trying morning for both of you. She is truly repentant."

"I pity her sincerely," I said. "When may I see her again?"

"Never, I fear. The wish to see you is all that has kept her alive for days; and that gratified, she may die now at any minute. Poor girl, with all her faults, one cannot help loving her."

Mrs. Merton was right. Meta died the very next day, calmly, peacefully as a child—Hugh's name the last sound on her lips.

"Tell Sidney the thought of her forgiveness soothed my last moments," was her farewell message to me. "If I had my life to live over, oh! how different it should be!"

My mother met me at the gate as I returned home. "Can you bear any more excitement to-day, Sidney, or has poor Meta's confession been too much for you? I think you can. There is some one here who is only too anxious to see you—who I don't think will be unwelcome."

She half led, half supported me into the house. Tenderly removing my shawl, she kissed me.

"You are better already, I see. Hugh," as she led me to our cosy sitting-room, "your patience is rewarded."

She left me, but not alone. For there, waiting for me, was Hugh Ralston, his dark eyes bent on me with love—unfailing love; and the next moment his arms were around me, his kiss upon my brow, and in the bliss of that moment I forgot everything—sickness, doubt, unhappiness. The joy of the present effaced all memory of the suffering of the past.

I pass over that interview. There are some things too sacred to tell, which we cherish in the inmost recesses of our hearts, as almost too precious for even ourselves to dwell upon. After the storm, comes calm; after the darkness, dawn. I had found, nay, regained my safe haven, my sure rest, and I was content.

"What became of all your promised confidence in me, Sidney?" Hugh asked me, presently. "You are not wholly free from blame, you see. Why did you not apply to me at once, instead of condemning me unheard? You know I once warned you against that very thing."

"I know," I said, very penitently. "But, Hugh, consider the evidence I had. Remember, too, that I knew nothing of your and Meta's antecedents, save that you were old acquaintances. I had no reason to doubt her veracity. Do not reproach me; I have suffered enough."

“I don’t think you will ever doubt me again. Promise me this, Sidney, that you will let me share in future every shadow that comes over your mind.”

And I was glad to give the promise he required.

“Poor Meta!” I said, at last. “Hugh, do you know I am grateful to her now?”

“It was not hard to forgive her,” he said, earnestly. “She was truly penitent; and what is more, she has restored us to each other. Had it not been for her, our mutual pride would, I fear, have kept us apart.”

“She referred me to you for part of her story,” I said. “Hugh, much as I pity her, I confess I am anxious to hear the whole.”

“It is only what you have a right to ask,” he said. “Even if I had not promised her, I would supply the missing links in her story: it is but due to you that you should know my past, and how she was connected with it. Part, I know, she has told you; the rest falls to my share. Not to-day, dear; it is too painful to me, even now, to wish to cloud our reconciliation with those distressing memories; but to-morrow —”

“You had best say to-morrow,” my mother’s cheerful voice, cheerful once more, interrupted. “Hugh, I am going to send you off — this poor child has had enough to go through to-day. You must go home, and she must go to bed. It is only excitement that has kept her up.”

And in spite of all our entreaties, my mother carried her point. Hugh grumbled, and so did I. It was of no use, she was firm.

It was with a very thankful heart that I lay down to rest that evening. That long April day had brought me wonderful tidings, “good tidings of great joy.”

Excitement generally keeps us awake: it was not so

with me. The change from utter loneliness and despair to peace, perfect peace, soothed my long-agitated mind, and I slept, for the first time for many months, as calmly and peacefully as a child.

For the storms of my life were over, and, so far as mortal power can guarantee it, my happiness was now secure.

I would hear the missing links in Meta's story tomorrow.

CHAPTER XXVI.

FIVE YEARS AGO.

IT was not till afternoon, however, that Hugh came to see me. The rush of the preceding day had done me good ; the change in my prospects had effectually roused me from my listless apathy, and restored me to something like the old Sidney Elliott. Hugh told me, when he did come, that the night's rest had done wonders.

“But why were you not here this morning?” I asked him. “Here I looked for you, counting every moment, and you never came. Why did you play truant?”

“I had far rather have been with you, dear,” very seriously. “My morning was spent by a death-bed — Meta's ! I knew you would not grudge her that poor comfort.”

Then it was all over ! I could but hope that all was well.

Hugh sat gazing thoughtfully into the fire, which, April though it was, blazed on the hearth, before he spoke again. It was with an effort that he did speak at last.

“Sidney, had it not been for my solemn promise to Meta, I should be tempted to ask you to place confidence enough in me to let me bury the past in oblivion, and not recall matters which even now are inexpressibly painful to me. But, unfortunately, her past is so interwoven with my own, has so influenced mine, that I cannot touch on it without speaking of her ; and there are some things you

ought to know, for as yet you know nothing of my early life. What did she tell you?"

I repeated Meta's story to him. Then he told me, as he had promised, what she had left unsaid. Not as I shall tell it, however, in one continued narrative, but in broken, conversational parts, and much more at length than I shall relate it. I shall use his own words, however—they are far better than any I could employ.

"I shall have to go back years, Sidney, to my early boyhood. Walter, my brother, of whom Meta spoke to you, was a year my senior. We were at school together, we kept pace in all our studies, for we were devotedly attached to each other, and I worked hard that we might not be separated. I think now that he did not exert himself as much as he might have done, so that I might keep up with him.

"We entered and passed through college together, and after graduating, both—something rather unusual for brothers—adopted the same profession, intending, when we received our diplomas, to enter into partnership. For the first time we were separated. I came, as you know, to Fairfield, to study under your father, one of the most distinguished physicians in the State; but as he could only receive one of us, Walter went to Philadelphia.

"I was to join him there to attend lectures, and I was not sorry when the time came. But I found our two years' separation had, as it always does, produced some change. Walter was handsome, attractive, reported to be wealthy: our uncle, whose name he bore, had lately died, and left him the greater part of his property, I receiving the remainder, and, student though he was, he was much sought after in society.

"I cared very little for it. I was devoted to the study

of my profession, in which I was deeply interested, and I resisted all Walter's efforts to take me out with him. I did not wonder at his success, for he was extremely handsome, with none of the vanity which handsome men generally feel; and as he did not neglect his studies, there was no possible reason why he should not enjoy himself.

"We had been nearly a year in the city when he first met Miss Gray. He had no concealments from me, and I knew very well that he yielded immediately to her power. I confess, I was very jealous at first. I could not bear to give my brother up so completely, for I knew, though brotherly love and confidence might still continue, that there were interests, ties, nearer and dearer still, and selfish though I knew it to be, I could not help the feeling.

"Knowing, seeing what I did, I was not surprised when at last he told me of their engagement. Then he gave me no peace till I had promised to go with him to see my future sister. It was with the utmost reluctance I made this promise — putting off its fulfilment from day to day, from some one of those strange feelings which at times come over us, holding us back, like invisible hands, from certain actions. I made every excuse I could; until Walter nearly got angry with me, and then I gave up.

"I wondered at my reluctance — I did not wonder at Walter's passionate attachment when I saw her. Sidney, you know what she was when she first came here; but you have no idea of what she was then. Five years ago she was just nineteen, and the most beautiful creature I had ever beheld. She reminded me of the old pictures of angels, fair-haired and graceful, which we see in the works of the old masters. Her eyes were the only contradiction; beautiful as they undoubtedly were, there was at

times a restless, steely look in them I did not like, though they could be soft and melting enough when she chose. She was but a shadow of her former self when she came here.

“Well, she won me completely. You can form no idea of the fascination such a woman as Meta Gray, beautiful, intelligent, full of tact as she was, can exercise over our sex. Walter was fairly infatuated with her, and I could not blame him—I had much ado to keep my own head cool. No, Sidney, I never loved her. That she fascinated me, I confess; but I never really loved—never wished to make any woman my wife save yourself.

“Her manner to us both was perfect. Timidly affectionate to Walter, gracefully shy to him, she treated me with a degree of sisterly freedom which was positively charming. I had no sisters, and the idea of finding one in Walter’s wife was peculiarly gratifying to me; and, judging as I did, all women by my knowledge of what my mother had been, I thought Meta—I had learned to give her that name—must be, judging by what I saw of her, ‘a perfect woman, nobly planned.’ I yielded to her charm.

“So far it was all right. Now I must take up the story where Meta dropped it. You know of the present I sent her? I am glad you have those stones, Sidney—they are inseparably connected with my mother, and I shall be glad to see you wear something that was hers.

“Meta wrote me a brief note, thanking me in very graceful terms, and asking me to call that evening, as she wished to express her gratitude in person. Walter laughed when I told him of the appointment.

“‘Don’t you two get up too desperate a flirtation, Hugh, old fellow. If I were not to be married so soon, I should be a little afraid of you. Tell Meta I will be there, almost as soon as yourself.’

“He was in high spirits, and I left him, he laughing at me, and I little dreaming how the evening would end.

“Sidney, I solemnly, positively assure you that I was totally unprepared for the interview which followed. That she had never loved Walter I never had suspected — her very actions had proved the contrary. I could not understand how any one could be such an adept at dissimulation as to deceive, not only myself, but her lover. I had scarcely recovered from this surprise, when, to my amazement, she acknowledged her love for me, and with an earnestness, too, which rendered it impossible for me to doubt her truth.

“I reasoned with her, I tried to argue with her, for I was inexpressibly shocked. I tried to silence her — all in vain. I pleaded her duty to Walter. She had but one reply to all I said — she loved me.

“And for a moment I did feel flattered. That I, with no effort of my own, should have won this peerlessly beautiful creature! It was only for a moment — her hand was on mine, I felt her breath on my cheek, her low voice whispered, ‘Dear Hugh!’ — when it all flashed over me: my noble, trusting brother, her unwomanly conduct; and I was master of myself.

“I spoke severely — I upbraided her and myself, though my own conscience was clear. Even now, I can find nothing with which to reproach myself. She listened — sullenly at first, so long as I spoke of myself; but when I began to speak of Walter, of her duty to him, she became furious.

“At that moment he came into the room. He looked astonished, as well he might, at the scene he had interrupted. Meta’s eyes were fairly flashing, her cheeks burning — she was terribly excited.

“Walter went up to her, and spoke to her in his usual gentle manner. His approach seemed to excite her more than ever, and he looked inquiringly at me.

“‘Hugh,’ he began, but she rushed at me.

“‘Speak, if you dare!’ in tones shrill and harsh. She had been standing, a moment before, by a cabinet of Indian curiosities. Walter advanced towards her.

“‘Dear Meta, how is this? You are giving me a strange welcome.’

“He laid his hand on her arm as he spoke. She looked at him one moment; then, with a laugh hoarse, yet shrill, ending in a shriek, she raised her other hand, which had been concealed in the folds of her dress, and struck at him. I saw something glitter—she had, unseen, snatched a dagger from the cabinet. I rushed forward, and before her arm descended, I caught it.

“Foiled here, she turned on me, screaming horribly all the time. We were both strong men; but it was as much as we could do to hold that graceful, delicate form, till the paroxysm of rage subsided. The noise brought her aunt, Mrs. Lee, to the parlor. Meta was calm enough now; but she was—insane!

“Her aunt told us the story that night. Her father, whom her mother had married much against her family’s wishes, had himself died hopelessly insane. This, however, had been carefully kept from the daughter, and they had hoped she would escape.

“Poor Walter! Philadelphia had become hateful to him, and that very evening, after a long talk with me, he left the city—never to return. I waited a few weeks, at Mrs. Lee’s express request, to assist her. Meta was placed in a private asylum, where she would be well treated, and the superintendent gave us hopes of her final recovery.

“The matter was kept very quiet. It was given out that Walter had broken off his engagement—he was very willing to have that said—and that Meta had left the city to visit some of her relatives.

“One year later, Meta was released, cured. Her insanity had been very harmless—no violent outbreak, save the one in which it first had manifested itself. Meantime I had followed Walter out West, where, in about two years, he married, wholly cured of his first love. Then I came, as you know, to Fairfield.

“In all this time I had wholly lost sight of Meta Gray. I wanted to forget her, for she had caused both Walter and myself such severe suffering that I could not even think calmly of her. You may imagine my surprise at meeting her here. I would never have set foot in Fairfield had I known her whereabouts; but it was too late to change.

“I soon found she had never forgotten her old love for me. In that, at least, she was constant. I could not appreciate it. Most of all, as I came to know you, I wondered at your intimacy with her.

“Well, I believe you know the rest. There is no need for me to repeat it.”

I had listened, deeply interested, to this recital. It fully explained all Meta had left unsaid, and I pitied her far more than I blamed her. My own love for Hugh made me forgive hers.

“‘The evil that men do lives after them,’” he went on, after a pause. “It is the contrary in this case: she has undone the evil she caused. Without her, Sidney, I never should have regained you—I can forgive her everything after that!”

“So can I,” I said, softly. “Let us forget her, Hugh.

She has passed wholly out of our lives. Our confidence in each other is restored — we need ask nothing more.”

“We will never allude to this again, Sidney. Now that it is told, I am not sorry you know it. Nothing in the world can part us or come between us now.”

“We need not dwell on the past, Hugh. The future lies before us, and we need not trouble ourselves over past sorrows.”

“And, whatever comes, we will always trust one another.”

Meta’s name was never mentioned between us again.

I rapidly regained my health. So soon as I was able to leave home, Hugh wished to take me to the sea-shore. We were to be married, and, ere many weeks had passed, I was myself again: happiness is the surest restorative.

Two or three evenings before our marriage-day, I came to Hugh’s side. Kneeling playfully by him, I laid my hand in his.

“Hugh! I have a confession to make to you.”

“Well, what is it? What unpardonable sin have you been committing?”

“Look at my hand first.”

He inspected it seriously, then raised it to his lips.

“I did not ask you to do that,” I said, snatching it away. He imprisoned it again. “What do you see in it?”

“I see only a white hand, fit for all womanly duty; that, whatever it has to do, will do it with its might!”

“No ink-spots?” I asked.

“None,” looking at me mischievously.

With a desperate effort to maintain my own gravity, I raised my other hand and laid my book on his knee. He took it up, gravely enough now, turning over its leaves.

“So I am marrying an authoress, after all. Well, I guess I shall survive it!”

“Hugh! you knew it all the time?”

“Your mother sent it to me while you were sick.”

“Do you want me to give up my pen?”

“I have changed my opinion in many things since I first knew you, Sidney. No, dear, you may write as much as you will. You have taught me that a woman can use her mental powers without ceasing to be truly womanly—without losing her delicacy and reserve. I would not now have you lay aside your pen. The world must have books, and it had better read such books as you will write—pure, true, elevating—than those which circulate in countless numbers. I am not afraid literary pursuits will ever make you neglect your husband; and, separated as we must be, from the nature of my profession, much of the time, I shall be glad to think you will have something to interest and amuse you in my absence.”

CHAPTER XXVII.

LAND AT LAST.

WE were married in June—a bright, sunshiny day, early in the month. There was not a cloud in the sky—the country, it seemed to me, looked its very loveliest. Our parlor was bedecked with roses, for it was the season of their most profuse bloom, and in-doors and out, the soft summer air was balmy with the delicate perfume of the queen of flowers, for garden and parlor were all aglow with her loveliness.

Very quietly, that sweet morning, in the presence of only a few friends, in our own parlor, we were married: very quietly, for both Hugh and myself so wished it. We both felt the solemnity of the occasion too deeply to wish for any save our best friends to be with us.

We spent two weeks—two happy weeks—at the sea-side. A short holiday, yet all Hugh could take. Then we came home.

My own dear home! earth's dearest spot! every passing year has but the more endeared it to me! For my life has been happy—so happy that I sometimes tremble at my own felicity.

My mother lives with us, the most honored member of our household. Advancing years only seem to render her more precious to me. “Her children rise up and call her blessed.” She is a lovely and lovable old lady. Old, did I say? Such as she never grow old—they

ripen; and she says she is young again in her grandchildren.

For there are children's voices in our house now — children's feet patter over the floors, children's sweet smiles and gleesome laughter to gladden our hearts. I have two darlings — my boy, a sturdy rogue of four summers, with black, flashing eyes and raven hair — a restless, sprightly boy, reminding me, with his warm heart and already decided manner, of his father. I only hope he may grow up like him. He bears my name — Sidney. I rebelled against this at first, for I did not think my son should bear any but his father's name. But Hugh would have it so: he said the boy was resolute and independent as his mother — that my name would suit him; and, like a good wife, I yielded. His grandmother spoils him, so far as he can be spoiled; but he will be none the worse for the love she lavishes on him; and I love my little son with a strange mixture of affection and pride — the latter only equalled by that his father takes in him.

But dearest to her father's heart is our little two-year old girl — our little May-flower — who came to us in that sweet month. She has inherited, from her Scottish grandmother, with her name, Mary — that name hallowed alike by poetry, religion, and history — her soft, serious blue eyes, and her light, golden hair, in glossy curls over her lovely little head. Hugh fairly worships his little girl, and she is never so happy nor so good as with him.

And my husband — my noble Hugh — what shall I say of him? I love him, if that be possible, even better after our years of wedded life than I did when we were first united. His name ranks high in our community — there is no one more sought after or respected than Hugh Ralston.

I have not given up my pen. It has brought me, under my assumed name, fame and fortune. But no one, outside of my home, sees in the quiet doctor's wife, the "distinguished authoress." I have no wish for publicity—the approbation of my home circle is enough for me.

Mr. and Mrs. Merton are still living—still we count them among our dearest friends. Over Meta's grave the turf is green. A simple stone stands at the head; it bears her name, the date of her birth and of her death—nothing more.

I see Annie Perkins occasionally; she has no children. Her marriage has changed her, and not for the better. From a slight, delicate, refined-looking girl, she has grown into a stout, ruddy woman, almost coarse-looking, and nearly as substantial as her husband. I never see her without thinking

"Thou shalt lower to his level day by day,
What is fine within thee growing coarse, to sympathize with clay.
As the husband is, the wife is; thou art mated with a clown,
And the grossness of his nature will have weight to drag thee down."

My own marriage was followed, within two years, by that of Will Cameron and Kate Strong. He is rising rapidly in his profession. They are a happy couple. Kate has done him good—she is just the character he needed in a wife.

Of myself I can say but little. My life, since my marriage, has flowed on in one calm, unbroken stream. Happy in my husband's love, my home, my children, what can I ask for more?

I am writing these lines in the evening, in our own sitting-room. The astral burner sheds its pleasant light over my paper; my mother sits dozing in her chair; my

children, "tired of play," have been asleep this hour. I am waiting for Hugh to come home.

There he is! He comes and looks over my shoulder at what I have written.

"Give me the pen, Sidney."

"No, you will only spoil my ending."

But I am gently lifted from my seat—the pen taken from my hand.

"May I not write what I think of my wife?"

And it is my turn to read, my hand on his shoulder, as he writes the words—I can scarcely see, for my eyes grow dim with happy tears:

"The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her."

THE END.







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